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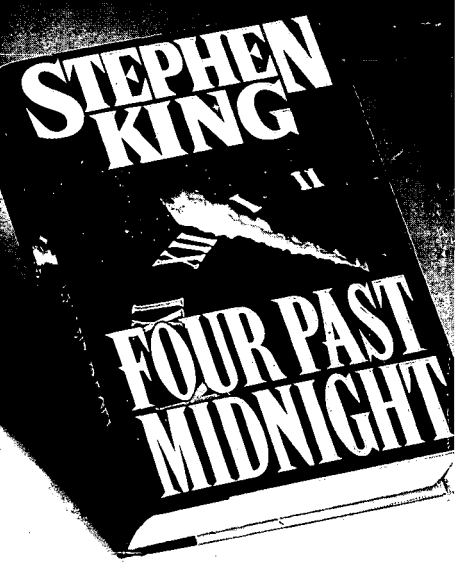

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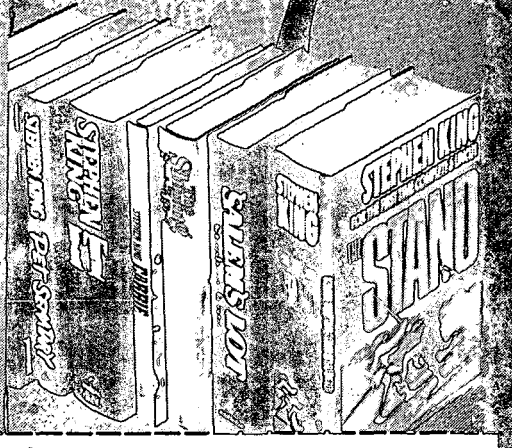

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On our cover is
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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"I wonder if you could give me some time—and some advice," the white-haired man said. "Naturally, I'd be willing to pay for it."

"Advice about what?" Dr. Sam asked him. "Is it about your health?"

"Not my health, exactly."

"Your wife's?"

"No, she's fine. It's someone else—"

"Well, the best thing would be for this person to come in for an examination."

The old man smiled. "That would be difficult, Doctor. He's been dead for forty-five years."

A surprising and significant story not only in the Dr. Sam series but in the whole, surprising, significant body of Edward D. Hoch's work . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE HAUNTED TEPEE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

On a cool, clear afternoon in September of 1935, Dr. Sam Hawthorne and his nurse Mary Best went shopping for office furniture, specifically for a new credenza to go next to Mary's desk and hold supplies. It had been a good summer for them both, and Sam wasn't concerned about the mounting number of unpaid bills that had resulted from the ravages of the Depression.

"I think the worst is over," he'd told Mary that morning. "These are good people—they'll pay up when they can."

It was shortly thereafter that she noticed the white-haired old

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man loitering in the hospital parking lot near where Sam and the other doctors left their cars. "Who's that man out there?"

"No idea. His wife's probably in for surgery and he's just nervous." The office wing was attached to Pilgrim Memorial Hospital, and they often encountered family members in the halls, waiting for the latest report on loved ones.

"I don't know," Mary murmured. "He looks different somehow. He keeps glancing this way."

Now she saw him again as they came out of the Main Street shop where they'd finally settled on a credenza of unfinished wood. "I can stain it myself," Mary was saying when, by the car, she stopped and whispered, "It's that old man again. He's coming up behind you."

Close up, the white-haired man wasn't quite as old as he'd appeared at a distance, though his skin was quite weathered. "Are you Dr. Sam Hawthorne?" he asked, stopping at the curb.

"That's me," Sam said with a smile. "What can I do for you?"

"I wonder if you could give me some time—and some advice. Naturally, I'd be willing to pay for it."

"Advice about what?" If the man needed to consult a doctor, the reason for it wasn't immediately obvious. "Is it about your health?"

"Not my health, exactly."

"Your wife's?"

"No, she's fine. It's someone else—"

"Well, the best thing would be for this person to come in for an examination."

The old man smiled. "That would be difficult, Doctor. He's been dead for forty-five years."

Sam's schedule was clear of patient appointments until late that afternoon, so they drove the man back to the office. He said his name was Ben Snow and that he'd been a cowboy during the 1880s and '90s before coming East. This fascinated Mary, who held the Old West in a sort of awe. "Did you ever kill anyone?" she asked him.

"Lots of people. In my younger days, some people thought I was Billy the Kid."

"Were you?"

"No, but we were born the same year—1859. What do you think, Dr. Hawthorne? I'm in pretty good shape for a man of seventy-six, right?"

"You certainly look healthy," Sam admitted. "Do you live in Northmont now?"

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"No, I'm down in Richmond, Virginia. After the Old West started to fade at the turn of the century, I drifted East, mostly to cities along the Mississippi. I was even up in Buffalo in 'aught one and down in Kitty Hawk when the Wright Brothers went up in 'aught three. I married soon after that and settled in Richmond. Been there thirty years now."

Sam had the impression the old man could go on talking by the hour, recounting long-ago adventures that may or may not have been exaggerated by memory. "What was it that brought you here?" he asked.

"I heard about you down in Richmond. I heard that you've got quite a reputation for solving impossible crimes. So last week I said to my wife, 'I'm gonna get on the train and go up to New England and see that Dr. Sam Hawthorne. I'm gonna tell him about the time with the Sioux and see what *he* thinks.' So here I am."

"Well, I've helped my friend Sheriff Lens solve a number of local cases," Sam admitted, "but I don't know how good I'd do with something that happened out West forty-five years ago."

"Will you listen, at least? Will you hear me out? I can pay for an appointment, just like a patient."

Sam smiled. "That won't be necessary, Mr. Snow. Go ahead and tell me your story."

Ben Snow settled back in his chair, and since he didn't seem to mind an audience Mary drew up a chair to listen, too.

"It was in the summer of 1890," he began, "and it had to do with a haunted tepee that seemed to kill the people who slept in it. Not all Indians used tepees, of course. It was mainly the plains tribes like the Sioux. In fact, the word 'tepee' comes from the Dakota language. Dakota is what the Sioux like to call themselves. Anyway, this summer I'd been riding north . . . "

Ben Snow had been riding north that summer, toward the Canadian border, and he wasn't surprised to encounter Sioux encampments soon after he crossed into South Dakota. It was good buffalo-hunting country here, and no one was better at it than the Sioux. Fourteen years earlier, after Custer's death at the Little Big Horn, the larger Sioux tribes had split up to avoid retaliation by the U.S. Cavalry. Now they mainly lived and traveled in extended family units. One rarely saw more than two hundred men, women, and children at a time.

Ben knew there was an encampment nearby even before he saw

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it, from the way Oats slowed to a trot and seemed to sniff the air. Indian horses—Oats could smell them every time.

As they topped the next hill Ben saw the encampment. There were seven tepees arranged in a rough circle, with an area for the horses off to one side. He rode down peacefully, though his hand was never far from his gun. The white men were hated and feared by most Sioux, and he had to show them he came alone, with no warlike intentions.

Almost at once a Sioux brave appeared to challenge him. The young man carried a carbine in one hand, but carefully kept it pointed at the ground. "I'm only passing through!" Ben called to him, hoping he understood English.

As the gap between them narrowed, the brave spoke. "I am Running Cloud. We hunt buffalo here. We want no trouble with the white man."

Ben could see the carbine was new. That interested him. "I like your rifle. Where did you buy it?"

"Trader. He come through with wagon, selling good hunting guns to Dakota. This morning."

"What's his name?"

"Landsman. He go to visit my father, Running Elk."

"Near here?"

"Over next hill." Running Cloud pointed. "One mile."

It seemed odd to Ben that the young brave's father would be so close and yet separated from the main party of hunters. But his main interest was in the sutler, Landsman, and his wagonload of provisions. Ben was running low on ammunition, and he could use a new blanket roll, too. "Thank you," he said, then added, "Could you go with me, so they know I come in peace?"

Running Cloud hesitated, then nodded and went for his horse. A few women and children had come out of their tepees to gaze at Ben, but he saw no other adults. Perhaps they were off on the buffalo hunt.

The Indian slipped easily onto the bare back of his horse and led the way past the little encampment and up the next hill. From the top, Ben could see smoke rising from a lone tepee some distance away. Nearby was a horse-drawn wagon with a name painted on the side. From this distance Ben couldn't quite make it out. "Down there," the Indian pointed again, indicating he intended to go no farther.

Ben assumed they had already been spotted down below and de-

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cided he could ride on safely without his guide. But it seemed odd that Running Cloud would go to such lengths to avoid his father, and Ben wondered if Running Elk might have some contagious disease.

As Ben rode nearer, he could read the name on the side of the wagon:

A. LANDSMAN, SUPPLIER OF PROVISIONS TO THE U.S. ARMY.

As soon as Ben spotted the sutler himself, he recognized him. Aaron Landsman was a middle-aged man with a fringe of greying beard around the edge of his chin. He was mainly to be found at the cavalry posts in the area, but often he dealt with the Sioux as well. The carbines were supposed to be used only for buffalo hunting, and though the Army forbade their sale to Indians everyone knew a man like Landsman would have a short life if he attempted to travel in the area without accepting them as customers. As it was, Ben wondered how he'd lasted this long.

Landsman came over to shake his hand as Ben dismounted. "Snow, isn't it? Didn't we meet last year at Fort Laramie?"

"I think we did," Ben acknowledged, accepting the handshake. "You've been selling rifles."

"A few, only for buffalo. You can't expect them to use spears, can you?"

"It's not my problem," Ben said. The flap of the tepee was raised and a young Indian woman came out. Bent over, with her face down, Ben could see only her body and her shapely legs beneath the fringed buckskin skirt. Then she straightened up and he saw the terrible scar on her face, running from her left eye down across her cheek and mouth. It looked as if it had been caused by a knife, not too long ago.

"Lakwella," Landsman said, "this is Ben Snow, an old acquaintance of mine."

"I'm pleased to meet you," Ben told the disfigured young woman.

She said a word in the Dakota language and immediately followed it with, "I greet you on behalf of Running Elk." She bent again to lift the flap of the tepee and a white-haired Indian with a weathered face emerged. His posture was that of a tribal elder, a chief perhaps, or even a medicine man. Ben gave him the traditional greeting of respect and waited until Lakwella had helped him to sit.

"You have a fire today," Ben observed, referring to the smoke still curling from the tepee.

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"His bones are chilled," Lakwella explained. "He has not been well."

"I spoke with Running Cloud at the other encampment. He directed me here."

"What do you seek?" she asked.

"Only to purchase some supplies from the sutler, as you do yourself."

"Certainly, sir," Aaron Landsman said, quickly taking his cue. "What may I show you today? I have some fine hemp rope—"

"A bedroll would do me, and perhaps some ammunition for my rifle."

Running Elk roused himself. "Will you be buffalo hunting on Indian land?"

"Never," Ben assured him. "I honor the traditional rights of the red man." The words were out of his mouth before he remembered that some Indians found the term offensive. Running Elk's expression never changed.

Ben walked over to the wagon and the sutler followed. "What sort of rifle you got? A Remington?" Ben nodded, and Landsman lowered his voice a bit. "I thought you stopped because you'd heard about Running Elk's tepee."

"What about it?"

"Indian spirits are supposed to haunt it. Some people have died when they slept in it."

Ben Snow looked anew at the dried and sewn animal skins that covered the traditional framework of long poles in the shape of a cone. The flap door stood open and smoke still drifted from the ventilation hole in the top. The skins themselves had been painted with various Indian symbols. One was a sun, and another could have been an eagle. Ben estimated that the inside was about ten feet high and might have measured fifteen feet across. Through the open flap he could see that the ground inside was also covered with animal skins to guard against the cold.

"That's a lot of skins," he commented to Landsman. He'd never taken the time to study a tepee up close before.

"About forty, mainly buffalo. I gave Running Elk the poles myself, from a shipment of California wood the Army couldn't use. Fine old oleander. It's a bush, really, but out there they grow to the size of trees."

"Who are these spirits supposed to be?"

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"Who knows? Kinsmen, enemies killed in battle. They hear noises sometimes but I tell them it's the wind."

"What's wrong with Running Elk?"

"Old age, mostly. There's no doubt he's a sick man."

"Is Lakwella his daughter?"

The sutler's voice dropped to a whisper. "No, she's his daughter-in-law, Running Cloud's wife. It's good that she cares for the old man. His wife, Running Cloud's mother, was the first to die from the evil spirits."

"That's a terrible scar on her face."

Landsman nodded. "Her husband did it."

"My God! Running Cloud?"

"That's right."

"But why?"

The bearded man shrugged. "Among the Sioux, disfigurement is the standard punishment for infidelity in marriage."

Lakwella came around the side of the wagon just then. "Will you both stay and eat with us?" she asked. "Running Elk requests it, and I know it would please him."

Ben and the sutler exchanged glances. "We'd be pleased to," Landsman answered for them both. "I'm in no hurry to reach the next fort."

The meal was roasted buffalo meat, and Ben found it tastier than usual. He complimented Lakwella, who'd done the cooking, and she smiled with pleasure. The heat of the fire had turned her scar a bright red, but she seemed unaware of it.

"Tell me about the ghost in your tepee," Ben asked as they were finishing the last of the meat.

Old Running Elk sighed. "It is why I am isolated like this, cast off over the hill from the others. They fear this space within my tepee."

"May I see it?" Ben asked. They were eating outside, around the campfire. Though it was nearly evening, the air was still warm. The summer flies had stayed away because of the fire, and Ben found it to be a pleasant interlude on his ride north. Now, however, he accepted the wave of the old Indian's hand as permission to enter the tepee. He knew he was involving himself in something that was none of his concern, but the idea of a haunted tepee was irresistible.

The tepee was roomier than he'd expected. He could stand upright in the entire center portion. Bedding was kept along the edges, along

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with food and supplies. Lakwella had accompanied him inside and she pointed to the open flaps at the top for ventilation. "We need those when a fire is burning. The smoke goes right out."

"Do you sleep here often?"

"Most nights, yes." She touched her face. "For the past six months."

"You are married to Running Cloud?"

"Yes."

"Does he sleep here, too?"

"No. He will not until I ask him, and I have not done that."

"I'm sorry about your face," Ben said. "The sutler told me what happened."

"He should not bother others with my problems." She peered up at what was visible of the sky above them. "The sounds come only when the wind blows. I know it is these poles. Perhaps they have worm holes that cause the noise."

"Perhaps the worm itself comes out by moonlight to kill those who sleep here."

She frowned. "You are a foolish man. There is nothing humorous about death."

"How many have died here?"

Lakwella held up three fingers. "The first was Running Elk's wife, soon after he began using the new tepee—almost a year ago. Then there was his son, Black Elk. After that, my baby died."

"I'm sorry. I wouldn't have asked if I'd known."

"The medicine man, Blue Fox, says it is a haunt and he can do nothing. He says the tepee is possessed by the spirit of a dead chieftain who was buried under the spot where it first rested for a night. The others believe that and stay away. They make us camp away from them so no children will wander into our tepee by accident."

"Do you believe it?"

"Would I stay here if I believed it?"

Ben couldn't help staring at her scarred face as he responded. "You might if you no longer cared about living."

Suddenly Lakwella looked toward the campfire outside, alert to some change. She went to stand beside her father-in-law and Ben followed. A half dozen braves had appeared over the rim of the hill, riding back toward camp. One horseman pulled a platform made of poles lashed together, on which rested the carcass of a buffalo. As they passed, Running Elk stood in tribute and called out a greeting in the Dakota tongue. One of the horsemen, a handsome brave a bit

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older than the others, detached himself from the group and rode over to the tepee. He greeted them all. "This is Blue Fox," Lakwella said. "He is our medicine man."

"Ben Snow." Ben gave the sign of greeting. "I am a traveler, heading north."

Blue Fox nodded. Then turning to Running Elk he asked, "How are you today, old man?"

"The chill has me—even when it is warm. But I will survive to see another winter."

"Will you hunt here all summer?" Ben asked Blue Fox.

"As long as the buffalo run. Then we will journey to the winter camp at Wounded Knee, where others will join us."

He was about to ride away when Lakwella said to him, "Tell Running Cloud that I wish to speak."

"I will do so."

The old man stared at her in silence, and even the sutler seemed surprised. No one spoke until, some minutes later, the summoned warrior appeared at the top of the rise and his squaw went to meet him.

"She has not spoken to him in six months, not since he cut her face," Ben told Landsman in a low voice. He glanced at the old man nearby. "Did the baby belong to her lover?"

Landsman shook his head. "I saw the child. It was Running Cloud's son."

Lakwella was coming back down the hill, Running Cloud trailing behind her. "He will be staying here tonight," she announced to Running Elk. "Your son has come home. I will get him food and drink."

The old man nodded and Landsman looked surprised. "This is really something," he told Ben under his breath.

"What do you suppose caused her change of heart?"

"I don't know, but I think I'll stay the night to see what happens."

Ben gazed up at the sky. The evening sun was already vanishing beyond the hills to the west, and he knew he'd cover very little ground before he, too, would be forced to camp for the night. This seemed as good a place as any, and Landsman generously offered space in his wagon.

"I'm used to sleeping under the stars," Ben told him. "But I'll share a campfire with you."

Running Cloud and Lakwella shared the tepee with Running Elk that night. The sick old man seemed to welcome his son's return,

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but in the traditional manner of the Indian he showed little emotion. Ben sat with Aaron Landsman by the campfire after the others had retired, until the full moon had risen. Then the sutler went off to his wagon and Ben unrolled his blanket.

As he was falling asleep, he happened to open his eyes. In the bright moonlight he thought he saw an Indian brave standing at the top of the hill, but perhaps it was a dream.

Just after dawn, Ben was awakened by a terrible wail from the direction of the tepee. *"He's dead! He's dead!"*

It was Lakwella's terror-filled voice, and Ben grabbed up his pistol as he ran toward the sound. It had awakened Landsman, too, and the sutler was peering bleary-eyed from the wagon.

"What is it?" Ben shouted, pulling open the flap of the tepee.

Lakwella stared up at him. She was cradling Running Cloud's head in her lap. "He's dead, just like the others! The ghost has walked again! This tepee must be burnt, destroyed forever!"

Running Elk was awake now, too, and when he realized what had happened he began a wailing lament for the dead. Ben bent to examine the body, and when Landsman joined him he suggested to the sutler that they carry Running Cloud outside into the morning air.

But outside, with the rising sun bathing his face, Running Cloud was still dead. Ben examined his body carefully, turning him over to look at his back. He had slept nude, as most young braves did, and there was no mark on his body to indicate an unnatural cause of death. "What happened during the night?" Ben asked Lakwella.

"Nothing. We slept. I woke up once and he stirred a little, but then we both went back to sleep. When I woke again at dawn, he didn't move even when I shook him. It was like his brother, and like my baby!" She looked desperately at the dead man's father. "I should never have asked him back! It's my fault he's dead!"

The others at the main camp had heard her cries and some of them now appeared over the hill, led by the medicine man, Blue Fox.

He, too, examined the body, and soon Ben could see that preparations were already under way for the funeral. The body was taken away to be prepared for the traditional Sioux burial ceremony.

Some of the women sat with Running Elk, comforting him, and Lakwella went off by herself. Ben stayed by the tepee, trying to read some answer in the symbols painted on the skins that covered it. That was when he noticed four fresh notches cut deep into one of

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the supporting poles near the entrance. They were like the notches on a gun butt, though bits of the wood itself seemed to have been removed. He wondered if ghosts were in the habit of keeping count of the number of lives they took.

Aaron Landsman walked over to where Lakwella sat alone on the grass. Ben followed and heard him ask, "Did you make love to him last night?"

She turned, startled by his voice, and shook her head vigorously. "I only invited him back as a beginning. I was not ready for that yet."

The sutler nodded. He said no more to her.

After a time, Ben asked, "Do you believe the tepee is haunted, Lakwella?"

"They all died. Four of them."

"But you are still alive. Running Elk is still alive."

She only shook her head, staring at the ground.

"The woman was old and your baby was tiny. Tell me about Running Cloud's brother. What was he like?"

"Black Elk was good. He was still a boy, younger than my husband."

"Did he die the same way?"

"Yes."

Ben walked back to Landsman's wagon. "Are you staying for the funeral?" he asked.

"No, it's a private thing. They don't want us for their ceremonies."

"If you're leaving soon, I'll ride a way with you."

Landsman nodded. "I could use the company."

They said farewell to Running Elk and the others, and Landsman promised to catch up with them on their winter trek from Wounded Knee. Then he climbed up on the wagon and got his horses moving. Ben mounted Oats and rode alongside.

"I feel as if I'm leaving an unfinished story," he said after they'd ridden for a time.

"Them people are superstitious. You can't believe all that haunting business."

"Then what am I supposed to think, Landsman—that you killed Running Cloud?"

"Huh?" Landsman reined in the horses and turned. "What in *hell* are you talkin' about, Snow?"

"You were Lakwella's lover, Landsman. You were the reason she got her face carved . . ."

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Aaron Landsman was silent for a moment, as if weighing his words.

"Do you think I'd fool with a squaw?" he asked finally.

"You went up to her just now and asked if she'd made love to her husband. That's hardly an ordinary question from a tradesman to a squaw."

"I'm more than a tradesman to those people."

"But I doubt if you came here to sell them rifles, Landsman. That's illegal, even for hunting purposes. If you were doing it, you wouldn't have admitted it so readily to me. You came here mainly to see Lakwella, didn't you?"

"I take an interest in the girl, yes. I treat her like a daughter."

"More than a daughter. When I asked you if the baby belonged to her lover, you said you'd seen the child and it was Running Cloud's son. But surely a months-old Sioux baby couldn't be identified with Running Cloud to the exclusion of other tribal members, and certainly not by an outsider like yourself. When you said that, the only thing you could have meant was that the baby was a full-blooded Indian, betraying none of the physical characteristics of a half breed. You had reason to know that Lakwella's lover was a white man. How else would you know that unless you were the lover?"

"All right, Lakwella came to my wagon a few times," Landsman admitted. "But the baby was Running Cloud's. He found out she had a lover, though he never knew it was me. I felt bad about what happened to her."

"And you killed him."

"No! I never touched him. Whatever killed him killed the others as well, but it wasn't me."

The man seemed so sincere, Ben was almost ready to believe him. "If you didn't kill him, who or what do you think did?"

"I don't know," said Landsman. "It's almost enough to make you believe in ghosts, isn't it?"

They rode on for a time in silence, and presently they reached the White River. "She's low enough to ford at this point," the sutler decided. "I think I'll cross here."

"Then I'll be leaving you," Ben said.

Landsman nodded. "I'm sure our paths will cross again."

"You'd best stay away from Lakwella."

"I know that."

Ben watched him cross the shallow water until the wagon was

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safely to the other side. Then he turned west and urged Oats into a gallop. He had time to make up, even though he had no destination.

The white-haired man finished his story and leaned back in the chair. Mary Best glanced at Dr. Sam and said, "It's a fascinating story. Did it really happen like that, Mr. Snow?"

"It did," Ben told her. "But I was never able to solve it. I never learned what killed those people inside Running Elk's tepee. Was it really haunted, as the medicine man said, or did something else cause those four deaths? To this day I sometimes think Aaron Landsman was involved, but so far as I know he wasn't even present when the first three died."

"Did you ever see him again?" Sam asked.

"No. Our paths never did cross again."

"What about Running Elk and Lakwella?"

"And that medicine man, Blue Fox?" Mary asked.

"I never saw any of them again. On December twenty-ninth of that year the Seventh Cavalry rode through the snow at Wounded Knee and slaughtered them all—over two hundred men, women, and children. That was Custer's old regiment, and some say it was belated revenge for what happened at the Little Big Horn fourteen years earlier."

"So it's a story without an ending," Sam said.

"Unless you can supply one. That's why I took the train up here. When you get to be my age, things like that bother you. Unfinished business, you know?"

After a while it was Mary who spoke. It wasn't the first time she'd helped Dr. Sam with one of his problems. "There wasn't any ghost in that tepee, Mr. Snow. I can tell you what killed them, if you want to know."

"I do want to know!"

Mary glanced toward Sam but didn't wait for his assent before plunging in. "Aaron Landsman had nothing to do with Running Cloud's death, or with the deaths of any of the others. They were killed by poisonous sap from the poles that supported the tepee. There was no ghost, and no murderer. The deaths were accidental."

"What?"

"Yes, Mr. Snow. You told us Landsman gave them the poles the previous year from a shipment of oleander wood the Army couldn't use. The Army couldn't use it because the sap of the oleander is poisonous. It was the sap, drawn out by the heat of the fires in the

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tepee, that killed Running Elk's wife and two sons and grandson. The sap no doubt contributed to his own illness as well, though his constitution was stronger."

"What about Lakwella?" Ben Snow asked. "She seemed unaffected."

"Just luck, I suppose. And she hadn't slept there for the entire year, only since Running Cloud cut her face."

Ben nodded. "But are you sure Landsman didn't know about the sap when he sold them the wood?"

"He was innocent, or he never would have told you it was oleander. No, Mr. Snow, those four poor people died by accident."

"I suppose it doesn't matter after all this time," Ben said, "tragic as it was. They would only have lived until Wounded Knee anyway."

Then Sam Hawthorne spoke. "Mary is no doubt right about the first three deaths, but I have to correct her about Running Cloud. He was murdered by Lakwella."

Mary stared at him. "How can you know that, Sam, after forty-five years?"

"Because you've forgotten one of Mr. Snow's observations—the fresh notches on the tent pole. We've disposed of the ghost, but if the deaths were accidental how do you explain those notches? Of course they weren't to count the number of deaths. They were merely to remove fresh slivers of wood from that pole—wood that could be inserted into meat as it cooked, or bled of its remaining sap over a hot fire. If someone poisoned Running Cloud that night, it could only have been Lakwella, who had invited him back. I believe she finally realized what was killing the people in that tepee, especially after her own son died. Perhaps she even saw him touching the sticky poles and then putting his fingers in his mouth as babies will do. She survived herself by avoiding the poles, and perhaps sleeping with a cloth over her head at night. She never told anyone, though, because she could never forget the terrible scar on her face. She was waiting for just the right moment to invite her husband back, to make him think all was forgiven and they could begin anew. With Landsman and you there as witnesses, it was the perfect time."

"Yes," Ben Snow agreed with conviction. "That's the way it must have been."

"You're right," Mary agreed. "I'd forgotten those notches."

"She wanted it to be fast, to happen while you and Landsman were still on the scene."

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Ben smiled for the first time. "You've made an old man happy. My wife will be pleased when I get back."

"Why don't you stay for dinner?" Mary suggested. "We could eat at my place before you head back. I'm sure you have lots of stories about the Old West."

Ben smiled at them both. "And I'll bet you have New England stories that can top every one."

"Maybe," Dr. Sam answered with a grin. "We'll see."

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a *NEW* short story by

JANWILLEM van de WETERING

In the November 1988 issue we published Janwillem van de Wetering's "Friends"—about a Boston real-estate developer who is followed to his Florida Keys retirement house by a ghost he met in Boston, before he—the ghost friend—fades.

Now we have retiree Jannie, born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, living on Egret Key, "the most glorious little island of them all," wondering what to do about two local characters even the deputy sheriff would like to kill.

One day you'll be really old, too, maybe, says Jannie, and you'll see *what harmless old folks are staring at . . .*

A CERTAIN MR. XYZ

by JANWILLEM van de WETERING

Doing away with Bad Daddy and Dirty Joe could have been fun, but it turned out I had nothing to do with it. No, sir. Not me. I'm a harmless old codger and the idea of popping Bad Daddy's big head and breaking Dirty Joe's spine wouldn't melt in my mouth.

Although, you know, I don't know. Take the deer hat, for instance. I didn't actually go out and buy the hat—I only, in a roundabout way, mentioned that the hat was available. The deer hat and the decoys were images that merely sort of shaped themselves while I was trying to be helpful, rocking away on the porch, staring at nothing.

Ever seen old folks staring at nothing? I bet you think the poor blighters are all hung up in a senile void.

Ha HA!

One day you'll be really old, too, maybe and you'll *see* what us harmless old folks are staring at.

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Enough preliminaries. Okay, let's introduce a few characters, define the here and now, sketch out some plot.

First, there's modest me. I'm retiree Jannie, born in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, oh, a great while ago, brought up in Boston, where I made a mini pre-Trump career before retiring in Florida, in the Keys, on the most glorious little island of them all, Egret Key, a subtropical horseshoe-shaped stretch of lush wetlands. You've got some fine old houses here, crafted by ship's carpenters a hundred years ago with finicky gingerbread ornamentation between tall white posts holding up a simple tin roof, and some fine old gardens overshadowed by flowering hibiscus, frangipani, orchid trees, and traveler palms.

You've also got a couple of moldy shacks in the mangroves, surrounded by cans and bottles and suffocated by poisonous Florida holly, acid-dripping buttonwoods, and peeling punk trees. Bad Daddy lived in one shack and Dirty Joe lived in the other. Daddy was a bulging man with a matted beard and mean little eyes. He looked like Father Christmas gone wrong. Joe was a skinny character in ragged jeans that were held up by string suspenders. When you asked Joe something, he would take his teeth out of his goatee/moustache combination, study them while shaking his head vigorously so that his long earring rattled, then put the dentures back. Dirty Joe looked like a pirate on a Bahamian rum label. They both liked to carry twelve-gauge automatic shotguns and Bad Daddy had a machete stuck into his belt.

Bad Daddy called Joe and himself "natural" men. They hunted and fished. They also drank. When bicycling by their shacks I often saw them staggering about between the palmettos, raising bottles at the moon, laughing raucously between gulps. Daddy owned a red Subaru Brat with the gear stuck in reverse. One Saturday morning he came by four times, full speed, back-to-front in the wrong lane, waving, with broken teeth showing in his beard.

First pass: "Hi, Jannie. This is the whiskey run."

Second pass, waving his square black gallon of Jack Daniels.

Third pass: "Forgot me smokes."

Fourth pass, waving his carton of Marlboro lights.

Years ago, when Daddy and I happened to run into each other on a shore path during a glorious sunset and were both at peace sitting down on the same log of driftwood, he told me that discovering square bottles had been a big event in his life. His elbow touched

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my side. "Always annoyed me, Jannie, having round bottles roll about in the car. Once I switched to flat bottles, life got a lot better."

This is America, everybody improves on doing his own thing. But then others do, too, and all that egotism might just start getting in itself's way.

Deputy Sheriff Wacko shares Egret Key with me, with the memory of Bad Daddy and Dirty Joe, and with a bunch of rich folks who descended during the last decade: leftover rich folks. Their providers, having provided, died and left little old widowed ladies watering palm trees, middle-aged spinster daughters watching soaps, and beautiful aging boys milking their trust funds. Most of them share their loneliness with little dogs. I admit little yappy dogs are annoying. I like to bike along Egret Boulevard and the dogs scurried about my wheels. I also like to row about the cove and the dogs set up a squeaky chorus on the shores. They also messed up sidewalks. Then they all disappeared.

Now wasn't that amazing?

The sheriff had a lot of phone calls from the bereaved of Egret Key and as Deputy Wacko lives right here he was charged with the investigation. How come the Chihuahuas, Bichon Frises, Miniature Schnauzers, and other undersized pedigrees were no longer driving us crazy?

"I didn't do it, Wacko," I said.

Wacko, a wiry little man, is shiny bald, although young. Wacko is fierce. His parents beat on him, his friends betrayed him every which way, his wife foulmouthed him all around, then left. Wacko fiercely dislikes most human life forms. Wacko loves wildlife. His special pets are a tribe of raccoons that sit around his veranda every night to consume free handouts. He hermits in a tower of junk sculpture, a work of art tied to a large number of long nine-inch poles that landed up on his beach somehow. He says his home wouldn't have been a tower if he had had a saw.

"You look like the archangel that's been showing up in my dreams," Wacko said when he came to interrogate me about the lost dogs. "You play the trumpet, Jannie?"

I whistled a Miles Davis ballad on my rear porch while we watched pelicans plunging in Egret cove. Wacko drummed lead bongo. My parrot filled in some cool scat behind us. I brought out my cowbells. We cracked a few alcohol-free beers, rolling the bottles around in

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our experienced hands, careful not to show the labels. Never spoil the All American scene.

"Daddy and Joe got the fuzzballs," Wacko said on a second visit. "They told me. There are no witnesses, the evidence is consumed, and the suspects won't repeat their confessions in court, so I can't arrest them."

I was nodding gently. Harmless old codgers nod gently a lot. It means they understand. I didn't really understand, until Wacko explained.

Daddy and Joe had been catching the dogs by leaving garbage about. Little pedigree dogs just love to roll around in garbage. After Baby and Peedee and Kifi and Mousey and whatever their little names were had rolled around enough, Daddy and Joe whacked them into their fish net. They then called Old Croc.

You've heard about Florida alligators?

Seen them on the nature channel? Alligators are mean. Crocodiles are meaner. There are golf links on the next key and there are waterholes on the links. The little ponds are filled with salt water, fed through subterranean streams. Crocodiles sneak in and catch the alligators sunning themselves around the holes. The alligators roar and snap their mighty jaws, but the crocodile's much mightier jaws have gator by the tail and drag him quickly into the hole.

We have a huge crocodile in Egret marsh. I've seen him. He isn't nice. He was Daddy's and Joe's friend. When they whistled, Old Croc came out, opened up, gurgled expectantly deep in his primeval throat, and in went Baby, Peedee, Kifi, or Mousey.

Old Croc chomped once, gulped once.

"And there's nothing I can do about it," Wacko said, shifting about on my porch stool, making his gun belt creak. "So Daddy and Joe say."

"Nothing," I murmured happily. "Nothing" always sounds like magic to me. Just imagine what would happen if there were nothing left. There'd still be space, you say? No, no—we agreed there would only be nothing. There would still be emptiness, you say? No, no—just nothing. And in that nothing there would be everything, and in that everything would be the perfect way to catch Bad Daddy and Dirty Joe.

"You think I should kill 'em?" Wacko asked.

"Now now," I said, getting the potato chips and the cucumber dip. I'm a harmless old codger, remember? I was losing some harmless ground, though, when Wacko told me about Daddy and Joe tres-

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passing into his beach tower—while Wacko was off for a few days taking a crime-prevention course in Miami—and blasting turkey vultures with their shotguns.

There are some beautiful birds around here. The frigate, for instance. The frigate, on its huge forked wings, planes around forever. The frigate bird is an aristocrat, but turkey vultures plane good, too. Daddy and Joe called the acrobatic vultures "buzzards." They said buzzards make good shooting practice. Daddy and Joe liked to lure them by dragging in cadavers caught in mangrove roots on the shore side of their shacks and then hit the big birds with supershot. From Wacko's tower the shooting was even better.

Bang bang go the birdies.

"Daddy and Joe didn't leave prints in your home?" I asked.

They had wiped them all off.

Daddy and Joe also didn't leave prints on the raccoon kittens they threw into thornbushes after trapping their parents, or on the dwarf whitetail deer, the pride of our Keys, a truly endangered species—maybe only a few hundred specimens left on the planet.

Daddy and Joe were shooting the little deer.

"You think I should kill the bad guys?" Wacko asked again.

"Now now," I said gently.

Wacko knows I like to watch ducks when I row. We have quite a few species here, including the still common mallard, the less common pintail, the bufflehead—and my favorite, the red-breasted merganser. "They had fifty-two ducks lined up on Little Egret Key beach," Wacko said, "rotting." He looked me straight in the eye. "Some mergansers, too."

"Wouldn't eat tasty ducks?" I asked.

"Nah," Wacko said. "There were some bales of pot floating in last week and Daddy and Joe dried and sold them. Bought them plenty of microwave dinners. No need to dress fifty-two dead ducks."

I got so mad that my bony knees rattled.

Wacko tranquilized my knees by holding them briefly. "I'd like to kill Daddy and Joe."

"Mmm," I said.

The very next day I saw the deer hat in a Duval window. We have these stores in Key West, selling things tourists need, like hats with plastic turds on them, or four-letter-word texts, or texts that will make America better. One hat said NO MORE IMPORTS. The label inside the hat said *Made in China*. There was also a deer hat. Chinese

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exporters are clever. They had fashioned the head of a small deer out of cloth and stuck it on a hat. That deer head looked real.

A deer-hunter hat, I thought, and I told Wacko about it.

Next thing I hear, nobody has seen Daddy for a while, but there are lots of vultures flying above the mangroves and when a lobsterman goes ashore to take a looksee he looksees Daddy's remains. He radios the Marine Patrol and it is noted that Daddy's remains are topped with a deer hat just like the one I saw in the Duval store, Key West.

"Shot through the deer hat," Deputy Sheriff Wacko, who helped check corpse and scene, noted.

Daddy's death was filed away as a hunting accident. The bullet was traced to Dirty Joe's rifle. Joe said he had been out hunting at dawn on our west shore, near Indian Grave Bluff, and he thought he saw a raccoon. Quick as lightning, he shot the varmint.

"A staghorn raccoon?" the sheriff asked.

Joe took out his teeth and looked at them for a while.

"Bad eyesight?" the sheriff asked.

Joe nodded. He put his teeth back. He said he had lost his glasses, drinking at the Free Beer Tomorrow saloon.

So why didn't Joe go to look for the staghorn raccoon after he shot the varmint?

Another long look at the teeth.

Okay, Joe said. He hadn't felt good. This bleeding ulcer of his got to oozing and cramping again and he had to take himself home forthwith, leaving his trophy unchecked on the bluff.

Pretty tricky. Why would Bad Daddy be moseying along on the most bug-infested part of Egret Key wearing a deer hat in the early morning? And why would Dirty Joe happen to be about at that exact time within sighting distance of that exact location, loaded for deer? My construction is that a certain Mr. XYZ told someone that he had been seeing deer at dawn near the bluff. XYZ was sure that this someone would be drinking at Free Beer Tomorrow that very night, and there tell Dirty Joe. Bad Daddy had been banned from the saloon for beating on small drinkers, so he would be drinking at home and not hear about the deer. XYZ would then be up bright and early the next morning and prod Bad Daddy awake with the business end of his service magnum revolver and march hungover Daddy to the bluff—make him put on the deer hat, make him stagger about on the bluff, so that Joe would mistake him for a deer and pick him off.

Proof?

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None whatsoever, but I did stick a length of bamboo into the ground at the spot where Daddy got blown away, a six-foot length. Daddy was six foot. On top of the bamboo I stuck a piece of bougainvillea, complete with bright-red flowers. After that I placed myself where Dirty Joe fired his rifle. What did I see? Flowers only. No bamboo.

Now Joe could have taken different positions from between his mangrove cover, but they would all be lower down than where Daddy was made to march about by XYZ. So all Joe would ever see was Daddy's hat, or rather the antlers on the hat, so he would fire a little lower, to get the deer in the brain. And he got into Daddy's brain.

One hunting accident makes for one less Bad Daddy.

Which leaves Dirty Joe.

It also leaves me, rocking on my porch, still staring at nothing.

And what do I see?

I see Joe gunning up his 50-hp Yamaha outboard on the sixteen-foot skiff built in Ciudad Juarez, racing out to blast more ducks. He won't eat them again because more pot has been floating about the coast—the smugglers must have been shooting each other up again out at Bimini. Joe is out for killing merganser ducks. Maybe Joe will be aiming for white-crested pigeons, too, that'll be about to do their spring dance before nesting now and not paying attention.

Egret Cove is shallow, maybe a foot deep at most places, but there are channels—some marked, some not. The unmarked channels are more interesting, for they lead to good illegal lobster spots, nicely invisible to rangers. I've seen Joe's skiff zipping along at high speed where the reef is high and razor-sharp.

How does Joe do it? I've rowed out there and seen his secret markings. They're duck decoys, anchored in the reef, marking a narrow slip-through. Now suppose those decoys would get moved about a bit, then Joe would come zipping along, thinking his propeller would clear the reef. It would get caught on the reef. So here we have Joe's skiff suddenly stopped, with nowhere to go but flip over backward. What would that do to Joe? I mean, him flipping over backward with the skiff, and getting the skiff on top of him. Reef below, boat above. Between a reef and a hard skiff. This is happening at speed, too.

The happening broke Dirty Joe's spine.

Wacko came to tell me about it. "It's okay," he said. "Just another

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fatal accident again. Relax, old buddy. No one knows you shifted the decoys."

I hadn't gotten around to shifting the decoys yet.

Wacko hadn't shifted the decoys, either. I hadn't had a chance to tell him. Wacko couldn't know about Joe's private channel and the two plastic ducks anchored there. He deducted it later, at the scene, snorkeling around.

Wacko winked. "The decoys were marking a very narrow passage, got shifted, Joe zips along, dead Joe."

"Very clever," Wacko said. "You're an archangel, all right, Jannie. You execute your judgments." He patted my knees that were shaking again. "The deer hat was good, too."

I tried my harmless old-codger smile.

"But how did you do Daddy?" Wacko asked. "The decoy murder was kind of simple, but with the deer hat you had a lot of intangibles there. You had to make sure that Bad Daddy was in the right place at the right time—and wearing that damn hat."

"Now now," I said.

Wacko left.

I rocked my porch chair.

So things are not what they seemed to be again. I've been noticing that more and more. Here I thought that Wacko killed Daddy and he didn't. Here I thought that I was getting myself ready to go out and shift the decoys and I didn't have to. What did shift the decoys? Some freak current combined with high tides and harsh winds that we were having at that time? Joe knew about the freak currents and he checked his markers once in a while, but he was getting sloppy, what with finding all that free pot and spending more time at Free Beer Tomorrow—you know how it goes.

So what *did* happen with the deer hat? As both protagonists are dead it's hard to say, but we do have a common drinking factor here. My bet now is that Daddy happened to be staggering about Duval and happened to see the deer hat. He bought it and that night, drinking in his shack by himself, he put it on for a lark. He wandered about outside, fell down, fell asleep. The next morning he woke up just as Joe was out hunting for deer. Daddy got up, the fake deer head became visible above the mangroves. Joe fired.

Nothing to do with Wacko. Nothing to do with me, either? Did I tell Bad Daddy to buy himself a silly hat and get drunk? Did I tell the freak current to shift Joe's decoys? Could there be a connection

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between a harmless old codger's thoughts and what actually happens out there?

"Wow," Wacko kept saying, patting my knees. "Got to hand it to you, guru."

Would I bother explaining my innocence to Deputy Sheriff Wacko, my hard-won disciple?

Maybe not. I just sat there, rocking gently on my porch, whistling a jazzy ballad, hardly noticing Wacko leaving, wondering whether I would be staring into nothing again sometime soon.

And if I were staring at nothing, would something show up that might connect me to the Colombian lady?

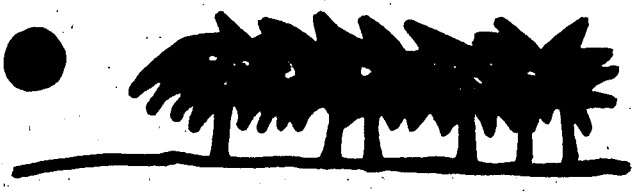
I mean, would this thing work two ways?

Doing away with the bad guys, attracting the good guys? The good *lady*, in this case? She is beautiful. I notice her driving by all the time, in the white Mercedes. She's a leftover from the drug wars, a lonely widow, a little over half my age.

Would I will her my way?

I would not, of course. I shook off the temptation. I got up, picked a bouquet of bougainvillea and frangipani, combed my whiskers, put on a clean shirt, phoned, invited myself for tea.

Voodoo, even of the detached guru variety, is for bad guys only. A good lady should be given her chances.



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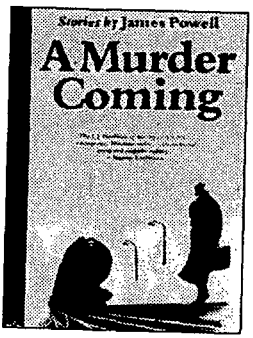

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"If there was brain trauma there should have been some bleeding in the subdural space beneath the bone. But there was none," Rita told Charlie. "That's what made the doctor suspicious . . . "

THE SOLE BENEFICIARY

by STUART NEWMAN

Red-flagging a fraudulent claim is easy. Proving it, though, is murder.

Agnes Libove died less than one month after the purchase of her term-life policy. Her husband Wayne—the sole beneficiary of a $200,000 lump-sum benefit—filed the claim less than twenty-four hours later. It sent up more flags than a Veterans Day parade.

I lunched the following afternoon with Rita Clark, a pathologist from the Medical Examiner's Office. Rita is tall, with flaming red hair that could wake the dead, but fortunately never did at the city morgue.

"A classic case of foul play, Charlie," she said, as she jabbed her fork into a garden salad. "There was no reason for that woman's death. Aside from some minor bruising, she was basically okay."

"What do you know about the accident?" I asked.

"It happened on Second Avenue. She and Mr. Libove were broadsided at the Eighteenth Street intersection. They were hit by one of those old clunkers that could knock down a lamppost. Mrs. Libove got it pretty bad." Rita took her nose out of her salad. "Not bad enough to turn out her lights forever, though. Didn't you get all this in the claims report?"

"Yeah, but I'm a glutton for punishment. Please continue."

She speared a forkful of greens. "The Liboves arrived at Carloni Med Center at about ten P.M. A few hours later, Agnes lapsed into a coma. A few hours after that, she died."

"And when were you notified?"

"A Dr. Harkin, or Gharkin, or something, called me the next day. He thought Mrs. Libove had a hematoma, so he did a CAT scan and drilled a burr-hole in her skull. If there was brain trauma there

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should have been some bleeding in the subdural space beneath the bone. But there was none. That's what made him suspicious."

"Did you autopsy?"

"Sure. I searched every nook and cranny of her body for needle marks. I guarantee, if there was a puncture I would have found it," she said, waving her fork, droplets of salad oil trailing in its path. "But I found nothing, not a trace."

She looked across at my uneaten sandwich. "What are you, on some kind of food-free diet?"

I smiled at her as the waitress walked over to pull the plates away. Then Rita and I got into a tug-of-war with the check—which often happens between good friends when the tab is under fifteen dollars.

Wayne Libove was Nordic-looking: blond, bullet-headed, and balding his way into his forties. He opened his front door and I flashed my license: *Charles Price, Senior Fraud Investigator, Gattler Insurance.* He showed me in, and as I took a seat in a thick-cushioned wing chair he asked, "Can I get you a drink, Mr. Price? A beer or something?"

Rule number one: never accept food or beverage from a man suspected of murder by poison. I shook my head. "Mr. Libove," I said, "the records at Gattler state that you're currently employed as a bartender at the Kostana Tavern. Is this correct?"

Libove nodded, sitting across from me in a broad-backed Queen Anne chair. I snapped open my briefcase and withdrew a spiral notebook. "And before that?"

He didn't take kindly to the question. Impatiently he rattled off a plethora of prior employment, finally winding up with his first job at a messenger service. After recording it all in my notebook, I looked up and said, "Now I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you for a sworn statement."

At this, my host slammed his hand down on a mahogany end table. "I've been through this a dozen times! What is it with you people?" he roared.

"Sorry—company policy."

"Company policy? Let me tell you something, Mr. Price. I loved my wife. Now she's dead. You understand? All you people care about is covering your losses. You've got dollar signs where you should have hearts."

"Yes, Mr. Libove, we're the insurance company from Hell. Nonetheless, it's in our mutual interest that you cooperate."

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Libove finally dispensed with the histrionics and told me the same story he had told the cops. After a half hour's worth of details, I pointed out his good fortune in having a minimum of injuries.

"I believe they were all internal," he responded. "I wake up every morning with muscle spasms and severe headaches."

"Drink much on the job?" I asked, clicking the ballpoint with my thumb.

He knitted his eyebrows as I bent down to close my briefcase. I kept my eye on him, awaiting a response. When there was none, I stood, thanked him, and walked out the door.

I spent the next day canvassing Libove's past employers. I received no sterling commendations. It seemed the only thing Libove was praised for was his decision to finally get up and leave.

At each location I asked to see his records. I met with some resistance and responded by laying on the charm. When this didn't work, I displayed my license and waxed legality. There's little glamour in the insurance business, as a tour like this demonstrates. Interviewees are often uninterested and at times downright hostile. Although occasionally you do come across some rare bird who appears not to have had a visitor in years. You can almost see tears well up in his or her eyes when you say you're just too busy for tea and biscuits.

I decided to wrap it up with a stop at the Crosstown Messenger Service. CMS went back about twelve years into Libove's history, but owner Ken Gould claimed to have full documentation on Libove and all other past workers. Gould's cooperation was heartening, even if the "documentation" turned out to be a dogeared application written over a decade ago.

Browsing through Libove's paperwork, I noted that he had once been employed at Morr Creek Psychiatric. I thought this important, given the nature of his alleged crime, and relayed the information to Rita Clark later in the day. She responded with mild enthusiasm and I realized that my excitement was owing more to desperation than anything else. Tomorrow would be Day Three on the case. On Day Four, I'd be given a new assignment, and Libove's claim would be one step closer to being processed and paid.

They've done studies which indicate that people with miserable jobs tend to be unhappy between the hours of nine and five. I don't necessarily consider myself a nine-to-fiver—but at times like this I do toy with the idea of taking a permanent vacation . . .

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That night I couldn't sleep. And as I lay supine, my mind began to wander. I thought about Agnes Libove also lying supine in the city morgue. I thought about Wayne Libove's display of mock indignation during our interview. Soon my gastric glands began secreting enough juice to bore a hole through one of the steel-grey desks in the Gattler office.

I woke up feeling like death on rye, like someone had slipped my stomach a jalapeno pepper while it wasn't looking. I pulled myself out of bed and foolishly washed down a cup of coffee. My stomach now felt like a Die Hard battery. Nevertheless, I shaved and dressed, and left for the Carloni Medical Center, where Agnes Libove had spent her final hours.

A couple of old couches and club chairs sat off to one side of the hospital lobby. Opposite was a four-by-six-foot oil painting of William J. Carloni, silver-haired, moustached, and looking none too happy about no longer being alive.

I approached a tawny-haired nurse seated at the front desk and asked to see Dr. Harkin, or Gharkin—or anyone whose name came close. Moments later, Dr. Walter Hardwin arrived.

Hardwin wore his glasses on the tip of his nose like an English schoolmarm. He was fleshy-faced, dressed in a white surgical smock and necktie.

"We sealed off the room a week ago by order of the police," he said. "And to be quite frank, we have patients who could use the bed-space."

I nodded.

"Speaking of the police," he continued, "we'll need an officer to accompany us."

The tawny-haired nurse announced the request over the hospital P.A. Minutes later a uniformed cop arrived.

We walked through buff-polished corridors, passing canvas bins stuffed with day-old bedding. A physician assistant pushed a gurney holding a parturient woman in hospital bedclothes. Visitors buzzed by in groups of twos and threes, and nurses strode by on their rounds.

When we reached the room containing Agnes Libove's deathbed, Hardwin fished out a keyring and opened the door. The bed sat beneath a monitoring system including an ECG machine, a blood-pressure unit, and yards of cabling. On the left-hand side, an intravenous drip dangled from a chromium T-stand, with a long plastic tube emerging pendulously from the bottom.

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I asked Hardwin about the nurse on duty the night of Mrs. Libove's death.

"I'll see to it," he said, and began to walk away. "Just pull the door closed when you go," he instructed the policeman and me as he left the room.

Twenty minutes later a young Hispanic woman arrived. She had a few pounds to spare, but was pleasant-looking, with wide-set eyes, a glabrous complexion, and silky black hair. She said her name was Camille.

I asked her how often she had checked up on Agnes Libove the night of her death.

"Oh, very often. I kept a good eye on her. I didn't let her alone for more than maybe five or—"

"And Mr. Libove, where did he sit while visiting?"

"Mr. Libove?" she said, slightly confounded by the change of subject. She suddenly turned and walked to the bed. "Right here, with his back to the door."

I pushed a chair toward her. "Here. Show me. Sit just like he did."

Camille took the chair and sat down gingerly.

"Now pretend you have a syringe," I said, walking to the opposite side of the bed to observe her, "and reach out to inject the patient."

Camille looked at me as if I were perhaps some madman wasting her time. I assumed it to be a thought she often directed toward the staff physicians and passed her a comforting smile. She nodded slightly, then tried to reach the bed with her imaginary syringe. But the intravenous drip was in her way. She struggled around the plastic tubing, nearly knocking the T-stand over as it brushed against her shoulder.

For a moment or two, I ruminated over Camille's wrestling match with the intravenous equipment, then I turned toward the officer. "I'd like to get this intravenous apparatus down to the M.E.'s office as soon as possible."

Checking the time, the cop said, "Well, second watch ends in about half an hour. I guess I can swing it by then."

I could feel my mood change for the better on my way out of the building. I bumped into Hardwin in the elevator and managed to exchange a few pleasant words. I even noticed an improvement in William J. Carloni's disposition as I passed his portrait in the hospital lobby.

Rita Clark's crimson hair bounced against the shoulders of her

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blue smock as we strode through the halls of the Medical Examiner's Office. "I placed a call to Morr Creek Psychiatric after speaking with you," she said, opening her office door.

I took a seat in front of her desk, where a gilt-framed photo displayed three carrot-topped children being fondly embraced by the proud papa.

"Libove was an orderly there about fifteen years ago—that would make it the mid-Seventies. I did a little brainstorming, drilled a few people there, a few of my own—and then it occurred to me." She pulled her chair forward. "Around that time, some of the doctors at Morr Creek were still using insulin shock therapy to treat various forms of psychoses. They would induce a hypoglycemic coma in their patients and then bring them back with glucose."

"What on earth for?" I asked.

"Well, like electric shock, it has a calming effect."

"I'll keep that in mind next time I need to unwind after a long day."

Rita ignored me. "Anyway, after confirming this, I performed a spinal tap on Agnes Libove and found an abundance of artificial insulin in her body. The thing that has me puzzled now is how it got there."

I heard a tapping on the door and turned to see the officer from the hospital. In his right hand was a clear-plastic evidence bag containing the intravenous drip from Agnes Libove's room.

"I think *how* may have just arrived," I told Rita.

On the way to the laboratory I explained my theory to her. "Perhaps the reason you couldn't find a needle mark on the body was because Wayne Libove didn't inject his wife with a needle. Perhaps he injected this instead." I pointed to the intravenous tubing.

We reached the lab and Rita put the tube under a scanning electron microscope. I watched as a magnified picture appeared in a dual monitor. Rita pulled her eyes from the viewer and pointed to a small dot on the screen.

"There's our puncture," she said.

I read of Libove's arrest the following day. Rita's picture appeared alongside a couple of detectives from the homicide squad. There was even a passing reference to a Charles Price from Gattler Insurance.

Feeling fatigued by the stress of the past few days, I put the paper down and reached into my desk drawer where I keep a compendium

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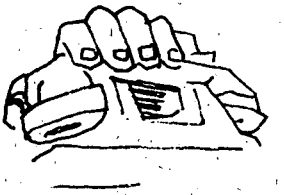
of vacation brochures. I pulled out some flyers advertising the sun-drenched glories of the Bahamas, St. Croix, and Martinique, and lined them across my desk. Dreams of an azure-blue sea began to float through my mind.

The stentorian voice of claim representative Mike Thompson shook me from my reverie. He threw a sheaf of papers on my desk, including a red-flagged claim from a $50,000 comprehensive auto plan. I swept the brochures back into the drawer and stared at the new paperwork for a moment. Then, without disturbing it, I rose from the chair and walked out, trying to remember the name of the new luncheonette down the street that served Jamaica Blue Mountain coffee.



DETECTIVERSE

BUT DOES SHE DO WINDOWS?

by WALT McCONVILLE

A querulous klepto named Nell
Exclaimed to her spouse, "What the hell,
You make me lift shops
And run from the cops—
I'm not gonna vacuum as well!"

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First-story author Peter Massarelli is a mechanical engineer who graduated from Dartmouth College in 1985 and the following year landed in Boston just down the street from the Spenser-Marlowe Mystery Bookstore. "For the first time in my life," he told us, "I had some free time on my hands and I occupied myself by reading a few shelves of Jim Thompson, David Goodis, and James M. Cain. It was also during this period that I started to write." Mr. Massarelli then spent a year in Vermont and now lives in Arizona, where, we are happy to hear, he is managing to find more time to write.

Damn maniac, Warden said to himself. On these mountain roads passing on the solid line was suicidal enough in the daytime, never mind at night with the headlights off . . .

ONCE UPON A TIME

by PETER MASSARELLI

The two spots flashed in the dark off the slate-grey wall and lit up Jack Warden's rearview mirror. The light appeared and disappeared so abruptly that he thought it might be lightning, and he waited for the thunder—one one-thousand, two one-thousand. He reached in between the bucket seats, groping for his cigarette pack, but only managed to find an empty cassette holder and an old traffic violation which he promptly tossed back onto the floor. He glanced down into the shadows at the base of the shift column, hoping to see his crush-proof box, but as soon as he took his eyes off the road he wished he hadn't. An old turquoise Buick with tail fins roared out of what seemed like nowhere and passed him from behind. Warden avoided being sideswiped by jerking his truck to the right, just inches from the guard rail. The steering wheel shook in his hands as the truck pounded over the skimpy gravel shoulder and the Buick surged ahead, out of sight behind the mountain wall.

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Damn maniac, Warden said to himself. On these mountain roads, passing on the solid line was suicidal enough in the daytime, never mind at night with the headlights off. Warden couldn't see inside the car—it was too dark—but he figured it must be a bunch of drunken kids out on a joyride, and he wondered if the car was stolen. He ran one of his hands through his thick bristle of greying hair while he continued his search for the cigarettes with the other. The pack was under his seat. He pulled one of the cigarettes out with his teeth and held it in his mouth as he pushed in the lighter on the dashboard. He saw that his hand was shaking and rolled down the window.

With all four wheels back on the road, Warden glided his truck around the mountain, where his high beams caught a quick glimpse of the Buick parked along the side of the road. The car was completely dark and the trunk was open, but there was no one around. Warden rolled his window back up and wondered what kind of game the kids could be playing. Peering down the embankment, he expected to see them urinating, but nobody was there. When he looked forward again, two men wearing overcoats were standing in the middle of his lane. They were holding shotguns pointed directly at him.

Warden hit the brakes and came to a stop not more than ten feet in front of the two men. He was lucky not to hit them. His brakes were acting up lately and he hadn't had the chance to get them fixed.

The shorter of the two men approached the driver's side of the truck and the other one trotted back toward the Buick. The little guy tapped his gun against Warden's window and motioned for him to roll it down. Warden was reminded of a photograph he'd once seen of a psychotic kidnaper holding a rifle up to the head of a hostage. The psycho had a crewcut and about three days of razor stubble on his face. The rifle was wired around the hostage's neck so that he couldn't get away. The little guy outside Warden's car looked like the psycho he remembered from the picture. His fingers were wrapped so tight around the shotgun they looked like bones.

Warden opened his window and the guy pushed the end of his gun into the truck. His unsteadiness caused the barrel to revolve in tiny circles around Warden's nose—it seemed to Warden that the guy was having a hard time deciding what to do. "What's the gun for?" he finally asked.

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"Shut up!" the guy barked. "Get out of the truck!"

He stepped over to one side and Warden opened the door. When Warden began to step out, the little guy changed his mind. He lunged at Warden and kicked the door. Warden's leg got jammed and his head bounced off the top of the door frame. "Forget it," the guy stammered. "Get back in and keep your hands on the wheel!"

Warden sank back into the seat and began to rub his leg.

The guy glared at him and bellowed, "On the wheel, I said!"

Warden kept massaging his shin and told him to go to hell. The guy drew a breath and stared at him. He didn't have time to waste arguing. He cocked his gun and ordered Warden to pull off to the side of the road. *"Slowly!"* he said. He kept the door open and the gun pointed at Warden's face. Warden coasted the truck over the solid white line.

"Hurry up!" the guy called to his partner. "They're right on our tail!" Warden assumed that "they" was the police.

The taller man came over to the truck carrying two canvas bags. From the way he was holding them, one appeared to be much heavier than the other. He tossed the bags onto the back seat of the truck, and the contents of the heavier bag clanged against each other. The other bag made hardly any sound at all.

"Hey, Mac," he said to the little guy, "what do we do with Andy?"

"We bring him with us," Mac told him.

"He's hurt pretty bad."

"I know," Mac said.

"He'll slow us down."

"I know, I know," Mac said, slightly raising his voice with each new word. "Just go get him."

"I'll do it if you don't want to," the tall one offered.

Taking the gun off Warden for the first time, Mac reeled around and shouted into his friend's face. "And what? Leave him here for the cops to find?" His voice was booming. "That's brilliant, just brilliant!"

The tall guy seemed embarrassed. He looked down at the ground near Mac's feet and whispered the suggestion that they could just roll the body down the embankment.

"We're taking him with us," Mac told him. "Now, go get him!"

It was obvious that the tall guy didn't want to upset Mac any more than he already had. He loped back to the Buick and Mac fixed his attention back on Warden. "How much gas you got?" Warden asked.

"I'll ask the questions," Mac said. He circled in front of the truck,

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keeping his eyes on Warden. When he was directly in front of the hood, Warden gunned the engine for a second and Mac jerked the nose of his shotgun back up at him. Warden chuckled.

Mac opened the passenger door of the truck. "I'll blow your goddamned head off!" he said.

Warden smiled. "And leave me here for the cops to find?"

"Keep it up, funny boy," Mac said. "We'll see who laughs last."

The two men sat in the truck and waited for the others to join them.

When the taller guy got back, he was carrying Andy over one shoulder. Andy's back was matted with blood and he appeared to be unconscious. Warden wondered if the kid was already dead.

The tall guy crouched down next to Mac's side of the truck and spoke to his boss. "Mac, listen now," he pleaded, "he's gonna die soon. Let's just get it out of the way now. We'll be that much faster."

Mac refused to look at the man speaking to him. "Put him in the back and get in on the other side," he said. He was obviously at the end of his patience.

The tall guy opened the door behind Mac and knocked the bags onto the floor. He tossed Andy into the seat and propped him up so he wouldn't slump forward, then he slammed the door shut and walked around the back of the truck. Warden could hear him cursing. He watched him in the rearview mirror and saw him gesture at Mac with the middle finger of his right hand. He noticed that Mac was watching, too.

When the door shut behind Warden, Mac turned around and said to his partner, "I won't have you questioning me, Steve." His teeth were clenched and it made his voice sound like a snarl. "It wasn't my idea to bring your brother along. That was your mistake. Second of all, I'm not the one who shot the clerk. That was you, too. But I'll tell you what. I *am* the one who says what we do from now on, and if you don't like it you're free to leave whenever you want."

Warden was surprised by Mac's mild eloquence. Steve seemed less impressed, however—he slumped back into his seat.

"Drive," Mac told Warden.

Warden pulled back onto the pavement and proceeded down the dark mountain road. Steve unzipped the heavy bag and took out a flask and a small automatic pistol. He kept the pistol on his lap as he drank from the flask. Warden thought he smelled whiskey. Mac

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turned around and told Steve to give him some and Steve handed it over without saying a word. Mac took a couple of long swigs and stretched out his stubby legs. The whiskey seemed to relax him a bit and Warden took the opportunity to ask a few questions.

"Car trouble?" he said.

Mac stared out at the road in front of them. "No—cop trouble," he said, starting to smile. "Want some?" He held the flask out to Warden.

"No, thanks," Warden said. "I'm driving."

Mac thought that was just about the funniest thing he ever heard. He laughed and wheezed and, shaking his head, he repeated Warden's words. "No, thanks, I'm driving." Warden wondered if he'd ever seen a man get drunk so fast.

Steve sat sullenly in the back with his head resting against the window and the gun in his hand. Occasionally he poked Andy with the pistol to see if he had come to, but the other man didn't stir.

Warden turned his attention to the back seat. "Say, Steve, did I understand Mac correctly? Is Andy your brother?"

"Shut the hell up," Steve told him.

"He's his brother, all right," Mac said. He turned around so that he could talk directly to Steve. "One great stick-up man, your brother is." His tone was decisively sarcastic. Steve said nothing.

"Not much of a conversationalist," Warden said.

Mac burst out laughing again. "You got that right," he wheezed.

The truck continued down the tortuous road. Twice Warden had to avoid some sizable rocks by swerving around them, causing the right side of the truck to come within a few inches of the guard rail. Mac kept telling him to slow down, but Warden ignored him. With the faulty brakes, he knew he probably should slow down, but he didn't want to give in.

After a couple of miles of silence, Mac turned around and jostled Andy. He put the flask to the boy's lips and tried to make him drink. The boy showed his first signs of life. His chest convulsed as he choked on the liquid being forced down his throat. Steve looked on with indifference.

"Stop it, for Christ sakes," Warden said.

Mac swung the flask around and clopped Warden on the side of the head with it. He picked up the shotgun and jabbed it into Warden's ribs. "I'm giving the orders here."

"Okay, okay," Warden said, "we'll do it your way."

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"Damn right we will," Mac growled.

"Know any funny stories?" Warden asked a few silent miles later.

Mac seemed pleased that he managed to shake him up. He relaxed back into his seat, took another drink out of the flask, and said, "Yeah, I know a funny story." He tilted the flask to empty it and Warden felt him staring at the side of his face.

Mac paused for a moment, deciding how to begin, and then started to speak. "Once upon a time," he began. "All good stories begin that way, you know."

Warden nodded.

"Once upon a time," Mac continued, "there were three guys. No, on second thought, make that two guys. There were two guys who robbed convenience stores."

"What the hell are you doing?" Steve said from the back seat.

"Shut up," Mac told him. "Don't interrupt me when I'm telling my story."

Warden knew what Steve was wondering. He was wondering why Mac felt at ease to tell him the details of their life of crime. How could Mac be sure Warden wouldn't tell the police? The answer was obvious, Warden thought. Mac was going to kill him.

"So, anyway," Mac said, "these two guys held up eighteen, maybe nineteen stores with no problem at all. Nobody hurt, no cops, plenty of take. Then one day the brother of one of the guys rolls into town. This brother is just a kid, mind you, he's got no place to live, no money, but the kid's brother decides that what's good enough for him is good enough for the kid and he tells the other guy the kid's one heck of a stick-up man. That's exactly what he says—'one heck of a stick-up man.' Well, the partner, not knowing any better, says okay. He figures with an extra guy they could try a liquor store, maybe. Convenience stores hire kids to clerk but a liquor store's a whole different ball game. Liquor-store owners clerk themselves and more often than not they pack a gun. You definitely need three guys—at least—to knock over a liquor store."

Mac stopped talking. He reached into the back seat and got a razor out of the lighter bag. He lifted the razor to his face and started shaving. Dry. He took his time about it, wincing occasionally, and went on with his story.

"So these three guys find a small liquor store—a neighborhood job. They make plans and decide to hit it the next day."

He stopped talking again—he had cut himself with the razor.

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Warden looked over and saw him smear a drop of blood against his face, study the blood on his fingers, and then start in with the story again.

"The kid is supposed to keep the gun on the owner while the other guys clean out the place. But it turns out that the kid doesn't know what he's doing—he's never even held a gun before. He lets the owner inch forward toward the counter and when he looks away to bee how we're doing the owner blows him away. So Steve here lets the owner have it and I hightail it for the car. Steve comes out with nothing but the bag of cash and I tell him to go get the kid. You see, the kid's still living and he's Steve's brother. Even if he's dead, he's still Steve's brother, and I'm Steve's partner, and it's not going to take the cops long to figure that out."

Mac had finished shaving. Warden glanced over at him. "Not very funny so far."

"Hold your horses," Mac told him. "I haven't got to the funny part yet.

"So Steve goes back for the kid, dumps him in the car, and I hightail it out of there. We pass a cop who's sitting in his car sipping coffee or something, and I know the cop sees us. He doesn't come after us, though, because he doesn't know we've done anything wrong. But once he finds out, of course, he's definitely going to remember seeing us and so I head for the mountains.

"There's nobody on the road and I have a clear shot. Then—you're going to like this part—then, we buzz around a corner and see some guy out driving his truck at one o'clock in the morning for who knows what reason. I hit the lights, whip around the bend, and that's where we grab him.

"Now, *here's* where we get to the funny part. The guy we grab is some kind of maniac. He starts cracking jokes and butting into matters that are none of his business. He acts like we don't have guns and couldn't blow his brains out whenever we feel like it. It's almost like he wants to die or something."

Mac paused and Warden said nothing.

"You get the idea, pal?" Mac asked. "You just keep on being a smartass and we'll see what happens. Don't think I've forgotten about that stunt you pulled, trying to run me over, because I haven't. From now on, if you want to keep on living you'll do exactly what you're told."

"Fair enough," Warden said.

"Now," Mac said, "what's *your* story?"

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"What do you mean?" Warden asked.

"I told you a story. Now it's your turn."

"Well, sorry to disappoint you," Warden said, "but my story isn't as funny as yours is."

"Let's hear it anyway," Mac said.

"Okay," Warden replied and thought about it.

"Once upon a time there was a man who got drunk after work. Not every day, mind you, but one very particular day. He'd just closed a big deal and some of the boys at work asked him out to celebrate. The guy had been up for days working on the deal and had eaten practically nothing since the night before. But, what the hell, he figured a couple of drinks wouldn't hurt, and so they all went out and had a good time.

"Well, seven o'clock rolled around, and the guy remembered he was supposed to be at his daughter's school play. Now, missing your kid's play is no big deal to most people, but this guy wasn't like that. He had a wife, a seven-year-old girl, and a boy who was still just a toddler, and he loved them all very much. So he got into his truck, hit the highway, and headed for his daughter's school.

"But a funny thing happened to him when he got on the road. After a while he started to feel sleepy. He made it to his exit all right, but after pulling off the highway he had to turn the radio up full blast to keep awake. The next thing he knew he was lying in a hospital bed surrounded by cops asking a lot of questions.

"It turned out that he fell asleep at the wheel. His truck swerved into the opposite lane and he had a head-on collision with a car coming the other way. The driver and one of the passengers of the other car were killed. Another passenger was hurt bad and went into a coma."

Warden stopped talking. He rubbed his face with one of his hands and Mac looked over at him. It looked like Warden was crying. "So what's the big deal?" Mac asked. "The guy was all right, and hardly anybody goes to jail for killing somebody with a car. Before he knows it he'll be out of the hospital and back with his family and soon he'll forget the whole thing ever happened."

Warden stared at Mac and shook his head.

"It's not that easy," he told him. "The car he ran into was his own. His wife was coming back from the school and both kids were in the car. He killed his own family."

"Christ," Mac said. "That guy had about the worst luck I ever heard of. But at least someone survived, right?"

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Warden didn't answer right away. He took a minute to try to get a hold of himself. "Well," he finally said, "the daughter was the one who wasn't killed right away. She stayed in a coma for almost nine months. The guy had to mortgage his house, take a night job, and sell everything he had to pay for the girl's hospital bills. But eventually she died. The doctors said there was nothing they could have done."

The truck was completely silent. Andy was unconscious in the back seat and Steve was quietly sulking.

"What happened to the guy?" Mac asked.

"He just decided he didn't want to live any more. He got into his truck and headed for the mountains, figuring he'd pitch himself off some cliff."

"Did he?" Mac asked.

"You want to find out?" Warden said—and he stomped his foot down on the accelerator.

Steve suddenly got interested in Warden's story. He leaned up in his seat and told Mac to make Warden pull over. For the first time, Mac didn't seem to mind following somebody else's instructions. "Stop the truck," he told Warden.

"Go to hell," Warden said. He gunned the engine and moved his face toward the steering wheel. There was a cliff about a quarter mile in front of them where part of the guard rail had been torn away. He headed straight for it.

Mac grabbed the dashboard in front of him and screamed, "Stop the goddamned truck!"

Steve lurched over the front seat and waved his gun in Warden's face. "I'll kill you, goddamn it!" he threatened.

Warden just laughed. "Either way, you're going with me!" he said.

"Let us out," Mac pleaded. "For God's sake, let us out!"

"You want to get out?" Warden asked. "Then get out."

The truck thundered over the gravel road, speeding toward the hole in the fence. Steve and Mac crashed their doors open and tumbled into the sixty-mile-an-hour night. Warden slammed on the brakes and prayed to God they were still strong enough to stop in time.

He jerked the truck around and came to a swerving stop with the left rear wheel hanging over the edge of the cliff. He flashed his

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high beams on and saw the two lifeless bodies lying on the side of the road.

Using the four-wheel drive, he pulled his truck back onto the road and cautiously proceeded down to the bottom of the mountain. He went straight to the emergency room of the nearest hospital and unloaded Andy and the two bags in the waiting room. A nurse chased after him and asked him for his name. She wanted to know whether the kid had health insurance or not. Warden didn't even turn around. He got back into his truck, turned off the headlights so nobody could see his license plate, and squealed out of the parking lot. When he was a block away from the hospital, he flicked his lights back on, lit a cigarette, and headed home.

It was very late, but he knew his wife would be up waiting for him.

DETECTIVERSE

A DYNAMITE STORY

by FRANK SANDELIUS

An expert with nitro named Hank
Blew a great gaping hole in the bank.
He backed in his truck,
But then got it stuck—
Now he lives in a Federal tank.

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At first, when Nathan began having lots of money to spend for foolish and extravagant things, Jessie suspected he was stealing. He refused to say how he was getting so much money that he could afford a new gold watch and a battery-operated cassette player. Every day he added to his collection of cassettes and played them late into the night. He bought pizzas every night—hot and fresh, not stale like the slices Jessie was used to from her raids on the garbage cans behind Tonio's Pizza.

Although Estella R. Pomroy has published scholarly work and two short biographies, "Jessie and the One Called Evil" is her first professionally published fiction and the first of several stories she has in mind about women and guns—she calls them her Pistol Packin' Mamas. She is retired after a lifetime in the teaching profession. Her Master's and Ph.D. degrees are from Florida State University. She taught at several universities and held department-head positions at two before returning home to West Virginia in 1975, where she drifted into a job at a local community college, retiring from there last year. Of her outside interests, she says, "I have enjoyed some success as a painter, a handweaver, and a public speaker, and I recently qualified as a certified aerobics dance instructor." Sounds like one very interesting woman . . .

JESSIE AND THE ONE CALLED EVIL

by ESTELLA R. POMROY

She sat huddled below the rotting windowsill, peering up over the edge, waiting for him to appear in the alley below. If there had been glass in the window, her breath would have fogged it up, but it had been a long time since there had been glass in any of the

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windows in the old deserted apartment building. It was just waiting for the wrecker's ball, but the back rooms on the third floor had been home for her and Nathan these past several weeks.

Mom had just disappeared one day. There had been a note addressed to Jessie and Nathan.

"Dear Kids," it read, "I'll be back soon. Take care of each other. Love, Mom."

After the electricity and water had been disconnected and the landlord threatened to turn them over to juvenile authorities, she and Nathan packed up their few clothes, some favorite possessions, and left. They had taken all that a fourteen-year-old girl and twelve-year-old boy could carry without attracting too much attention. Nathan was big for his age. He strutted about acting tough so that he could hang out with the one called Evil and his gang, the Evildoers.

Jessie gazed down at the empty alley, dimly lit by one pale-yellow light, and shivered as she drew Mom's old coat tighter about her thin body. She and Nathan had first managed to get enough to eat by going through the garbage containers behind McDonald's. All street people know that a great deal of perfectly good food is thrown out at fast-food places. After a sandwich is ten minutes old, it's considered too stale to sell and thrown into the trash. Jessie and Nathan knew all about surviving on the streets because most of their lives, until Papa left, had been spent living in old cars and vacant buildings. Then Mom had gone on welfare and got an apartment for the family, and they had lived like regular people for over a year. It was all right once you got used to living in a place where lights and plumbing worked and doors and windows locked, but it took some time to actually get to like it.

The thing Jessie liked best about living a regular life was going to school. She had looked forward to junior high this year, but she couldn't enroll because she didn't have an address or phone number and parents' names to fill in the blanks on the enrollment form. It was tough having to stay inside the old building while school was in session. She was afraid the truant officer would notice her or Nathan and it would be impossible to explain why they weren't in school.

She had worried about Nathan. After no one had seen him for over two days, she'd been certain he was in some kind of trouble. He had been a pusher for the Evildoers for weeks without getting

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caught, but she knew it was only a matter of time before he would be in Juvenile Detention and she would be entirely alone.

At first, when he began having lots of money to spend for foolish and extravagant things, she suspected he was stealing. He refused to say how he was getting so much money that he could afford a new gold watch and a battery-operated cassette player. Every day he added to his collection of cassettes and played them late into the night. He bought pizzas every night—hot and fresh, not stale like the slices she was used to from her raids of the garbage cans behind Tonio's Pizza. He promised to start saving up so they could rent a room with heat because it was nearly winter and the nights were becoming very cold.

Jessie couldn't remember exactly when she realized his employer was the one called Evil. Nathan had finally become useful to the gang and full-fledged membership followed his proving he had the guts to do whatever they asked. He must have proven he could do their bidding shortly after they had run away from the apartment, because after that he always had plenty of money.

She figured it was about the time he tried to get her to become a member of the Evildoers' girl friends and had had some of the guys come to look her over. For once, she was glad she wasn't pretty. Skinny and pale, wearing clothes salvaged from a trash bin, she looked like a little old bag lady. She never had any nice clothes, but it wasn't important—at least not as important as finding something to eat or a place to live for a while.

The Evildoers made fun of her and of Nathan for even thinking they might include her among the girl friends. They had come up to her rooms one evening, to inspect her and to see where they lived, bringing some of the girls along. After the gang had ransacked their belongings and determined that she and Nathan had nothing worth stealing, they decided to have some sport with Jessie. They never actually hurt her, but the humiliation had been complete and she had felt a new depth of degradation she hadn't believed possible.

She had been required to strip as she walked up and down the room, like it was a stage and she was the floor show. The girls had screamed and laughed as they pointed out details of her skinny underdeveloped body, and the fellows had bellowed out obscenities and sprayed her with beer from shaken bottles. Jessie was sickened to see Nathan joining in the general depravity of the scene. He had produced his cassette player and was playing music to accompany her performance.

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Then they had turned on Nathan and ridiculed *him* until he wept from the loss of face he felt because of the rejection of his sister. They had a lot of fun at her expense, and Nathan's as well, but finally they became bored and left them alone. Nathan blamed her, of course, and cursed her for not being more appealing to his friends. As soon as he'd pulled himself together, he flounced out of the building in search of the gang.

It was then that she decided to get Nathan out of the gang. She had no idea how she would do it, but it had to be done before it was too late.

She found the gun early one morning while foraging through the garbage dumpster behind the big fancy apartment building that faced the park. It was the best place in the neighborhood to search for useful items if you got there very early before anyone else. It was still dark when she arrived, but the street light permitted her to see inside the dumpster and the gun was lying on top of the bags of garbage. She quickly picked up the small revolver and hid it in her coat pocket. Looking around, she made sure no one had seen her and then darted down the alley and back to the old building where she could have privacy to examine her treasure.

She knew nothing about guns and had never seen a real one before, but she thought it was beautiful and it didn't frighten her at all. She kept it wrapped in an old towel and a plastic bag, hidden behind a loose brick of a chimney in the old building. Every day she would take the gun out of its hiding place and very gently examine it. Soon she knew everything she could learn about it by herself. It was a dark-bluish metal with lovely carved-wood pieces fixed on either side of the handle. There seemed to be some bullets in the revolving part, but she couldn't figure out how to open it up to see how many there were. There was always the danger of firing the weapon accidentally and Jessie was afraid to risk shooting herself or that the noise would attract attention.

The barrel was only about three inches long and words engraved along the side of the barrel told her it was a Smith and Wesson Chief's Special. She remembered a joke she had heard one time. A man had got the best of some muggers who tried to rob him. Everyone laughed when he said, "Them hoods didn't know that I had my two friends with me. Their names are Smith and Wesson." Now I've got those same two friends, thought Jessie with a smile as she ran her hand over the smooth polished surface of the little revolver.

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For the first time in her life, she felt she had power and authority. The gun gave her that feeling. She wasn't just a helpless victim any more but a person with the ability to get something she wanted or make someone do something she wanted done. She knew that the gun was going to make a difference in her life, and somehow she was going to learn how to fire it. She decided to try to get some help from Old Sarge, one of the homeless people who could usually be found on his favorite bench in the park. He was kind of crazy, but he talked about being in the Army all the time, and about Viet Nam and killing and fighting, so she reckoned that he knew about guns.

Old Sarge loved to talk and it had been easy getting him to tell her everything he could remember about revolvers. All she had to do was ask a question now and then and he would be off on another long monologue about some feature of the gun. She didn't mention the fact that she had ever seen a revolver—except in a movie. He never suspected that she actually owned one.

That night she took the gun from its hiding place, and with some experimenting she found the little latch on the side that released the cylinder and allowed it to swing out from its normal position behind the barrel. She studied its contents and noted that all five chambers were occupied.

Trying to recall what she had learned from Old Sarge, she finally located the extractor rod and, pulling back on it, managed to release the bullets from their chambers.

"Not bullets, Jessie. Call them cartridges. The bullets are the business end of the cartridge. The lead," Old Sarge had corrected her.

She examined the five cartridges and found that one of them had no lead bullet. That one was completely empty and it was the one that had been behind the hammer. She wrapped the cartridges in plastic to protect them and put them away in the hiding place until the time came when she would need them.

Jessie spent many happy hours in the big old deserted building practicing with her unloaded gun. Sometimes she pretended she was a U.S. marshal facing a desperado at a shootout in Dodge City and practiced her quick-draw aiming and firing. Other times she was an American spy and roamed the old apartment building in search of political enemies who were lurking around corners or in closets waiting to surprise her.

Her favorite, however, was policewoman. She would hold the gun

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in both hands, arms extended, and focus along the barrel. With the top sight on the front of the barrel level with the top of the rear-sight notch, she would firmly squeeze the trigger until the hammer was cocked and finally released to fire the imaginary bullet.

She practiced everything she had heard Old Sarge mention, even breathing. Just before beginning to aim her gun, she would take a deep breath. After exhaling most of the air, she would hold her breath, align the sights, and pull the trigger.

"Always squeeze the trigger," said Old Sarge over and over. "That's the most important thing in getting off a good shot."

She learned to gradually increase the pressure on the trigger until the gun fired and tried to avoid any sudden increase in the pressure or any jerk in the process. Sarge had explained that if the aim was off even a hair's breadth, it would cause you to miss your target by many yards.

The handle of the gun was called the grip. Old Sarge had demonstrated how the hand should be placed up high on the grip, as high as you can get it without interfering with the cocking of the hammer. Jessie's small hand barely permitted her to grasp the gun and place the ball of her forefinger on the trigger. She found that the weight of the gun could be managed better with both hands.

She learned, too, that she could maintain better control if she first cocked the hammer, then took aim, and, with a little pressure on the trigger, fired the gun. It wasn't long before she could squeeze the trigger while holding it fairly steady, using both hands, and she gained confidence every day.

Jessie was thrilled with the smooth, cool, balanced weight of the little gun in her hands. It made her feel equal to anyone else, and she knew that from now on she could handle anything that threatened her or someone she loved.

Old Sarge had told her that dry-shooting a gun was bad for it, but Jessie had no choice. She had to get used to the action of squeezing the trigger and the cocking and release of the hammer. Of course, she had only four bullets and no way of getting another supply, so she couldn't have actually fired the loaded gun even if there had been a place to practice.

The plan began to take shape when she saw the heavy wrecking equipment being moved into place at the end of the alley. Jessie had seen this process many times in her life and knew the routine very well. First, warnings had to be posted on all the doors and then the

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building checked for trespassers. All this had been done weeks ago at her building and she and Nathan had known they would have to move. With the arrival of the wrecking equipment it was only a matter of hours. She learned from the workmen's shouted conversations that they would be starting at eight o'clock sharp the next morning, and she figured she had just enough time to get ready.

First, she had to locate Nathan. It took most of the evening, but she finally learned that he was over at Evil's apartment. She found the address and, trembling with fear, she tried the front door. It was unlocked.

Nathan was sprawled on the sofa, and she had only to inhale to know that he wasn't only selling dope, he was using the awful stuff as well. His eyes were glassy and his breathing deep and slow. Short cigarette butts in the ashtrays scattered around the room were evidence of what had taken place. He was alone, but the others had not been gone very long. Jessie stood beside the couch looking down at her brother and remembered what her mother had written in her note.

I'm trying, Mama, I'm trying to take care of him, Jessie thought. If only he'd help me a little bit.

She looked around the apartment, curious to see how Evil lived on the money he made from people like Nathan. There was an enormous TV set, almost as big as a movie screen, and a stereo and hundreds of audio and video cassettes arranged on shelves along one wall. His closets were full of expensive clothes. Best of all, though, was the huge double-wide refrigerator crammed full of steaks, TV dinners, frozen pizzas, and sodas. There was more food here than she had ever seen except in a grocery store. She was tempted to make herself a sandwich when suddenly the front door burst open. It was Evil and he looked somewhat relieved to find only Jessie and Nathan in his living room.

"Well, if it ain't the ole bag o' bones come to get her little brother," he jeered. "Can'tcha see he's moved in with me for as long as I need him? He's been my best pusher yet, but he's starting to sample the merchandise a little too much, so it won't be long before you can have him back. Almost as good as new—ha ha!"

Jessie looked Evil straight in the eye with a courage that only the knowledge of her beautiful gun could give her.

"I came here," she said, "to see if you'd be interested in a business proposition. I can get you some really high-grade merchandise if you want to deal."

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"Hell, you couldn't get anything I'd want, let alone my customers. Now get outa here, I got company comin' and I don't want you or your damn brother around when they get here. Take him with you. Get him outa my sight."

"I know where there's a package about as big as a cigar box hid. One of your rivals stashed it a little while ago. I watched him and then I went back and got it. I'm the only one who knows where it is." Jessie looked at Evil steadily with a calmness she didn't feel. "It's first-class stuff. I tasted it myself."

Evil threatened her, but Jessie didn't back down. Like most bullies, he needed a crowd around when he picked on someone he considered weak and defenseless. Jessie moved toward the door and said, "If you don't want it, someone else will. I've got to get going."

"All right, all right. Bring it over here in about an hour."

"No, I can't get to it until later. You come over to our place after midnight and bring a hundred dollars with you. Leave Nathan here. I don't want him waking up and causing a ruckus while I'm doing some business. Come alone. If you bring anyone with you, you won't find me, or the stuff, either."

"I'll be there," he said. "You just be sure you have it. If you don't, you'll get something you didn't bargain for."

Back home, Jessie packed everything she wanted to take with her and Nathan's things, too. His tape collection and cassette player were about all he had left in their abandoned rooms. Most of his clothes were at Evil's and the watch was gone.

After she packed, she hid her bundles behind some old oil drums in another alley several blocks away. She had to be careful so that nobody would notice her moving and mention it to Evil. He probably knew about the arrival of the wrecking equipment, but figured she needed the money to rent a room before she moved out.

It was nearly midnight by the time she finished. She took the gun from behind the loose brick and replaced the bullets, being careful to leave the empty chamber in the exact position it had been when she found it. She realized from her practicing that when the trigger was pulled and the hammer cocked, the cylinder revolved one space to the left before firing. Therefore her four bullets had to be lined up behind the empty chamber in order to produce four consecutive shots.

Jessie took up her watch at the window. She stood back and care-

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fully aimed at various objects in the alley. She tried guessing where she would first spot Evil and about where his stomach would be.

With her thumb on the hammer, she pulled it back until it clicked into the cocked position and then, resting her arms on the edge of the windowsill, she sighted along the barrel and waited for the moment when her enemy would turn the corner into the alley. Traffic on Main Street contributed the usual racket found in any large city, but the alley was vacant. Jessie figured the gunshot would sound like backfire if anyone happened to hear it.

Suddenly he was in the alley, sneaking along the building next door and looking up at her window. She hadn't seen him until he was almost opposite the window. When he appeared in her sights she instinctively pulled the trigger.

Her first shot went wild and she almost fainted from shock at the noise and the strong backward kick of the gun as its deadly discharge exploded from the chamber. It was nothing like she had expected. But in a few moments she recovered enough to assess the situation. Evil had paused and was looking around, unable to identify the source of the noise he had heard. Apparently he decided it was traffic and now again he searched the third-floor windows for light or some sign of life.

While he stood squinting up at her window, Jessie took careful aim at the middle of Evil's belly and pulled the trigger. The bullet passed him and ricocheted off the bricks that lined the floor of the alley. Her aim was better but she had neglected to cock the hammer, so the recoil of the gun was still uncontrolled and the noise just as shocking. This time Evil appeared to suspect something. Perhaps he felt something of the ricocheting bullet as it passed close by, because he stood stock still, flat against the wall, and looked first at one end of the alley and then at the other. He scurried across the alley toward Jessie's building, where he crouched among the trash cans beside the entrance. He remained motionless there for several minutes and Jessie couldn't get a good aim. With only two bullets left, she needed a clear target before pulling the trigger again.

Finally Evil stood up, looked around stealthily, and reached for the door just as Jessie pulled the trigger for the third time. It was an old steel door which led to the basement, and as Evil slid through he didn't hear the gunfire behind the thick walls. Jessie's aim had been more accurate this time and the noise was becoming less of a problem, but her last bullet must not miss.

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It was very dark in the stairwell and it took Evil several minutes to find his way up to the third floor.

"Hey, where the hell are you?" he called. "Ain't you even got a light in here? What a stinkin' hole!"

As he reached the landing, Jessie stepped around the corner, put the gun against his belly, and pulled the trigger.

She packed the gun carefully in its wrapping and then searched Evil's pockets for the hundred dollars. It wasn't on him. As she had expected, he hadn't even intended to pay her. After she pulled him by his legs to a closet which still had a door, she stuffed his body inside.

Out in the alley, she collected all the garbage she could move during the rest of the night. It was a hard job carrying the bags and cartons of trash of every description up to the third floor, but by daybreak a trash heap completely covered the door to the closet that was to be Evil's tomb. She was worried that someone might make a final inspection of the building in the morning.

She needn't have feared. Promptly at eight o'clock, the crew was on the job. The wrecking ball was in place, and from her vantage point on a rooftop across the street Jessie sat with her precious gun cradled in her arms and watched its first swing make rubble out of the top floors. She knew it would take several days before the entire building was down and the mountain of bricks, pipes, wires, wood, and cement was scooped up and hauled away. In the meantime, no one would be going into the partially destroyed building for fear of falling rubble. Evil would remain safe and undisturbed.

Now it was time to make a fresh start. She would go and get Nathan out of Evil's apartment and they would find someplace where they could live. Maybe they would stay in Evil's place until then. It was pretty comfortable.

One thing was for sure. Somewhere, somehow, she had to get some more bullets.

"Q"

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Tom Whitney said, "Ricky is the grounds keeper who works in the afternoon. Last Friday evening, he closed and locked the equipment shed. Monday morning when I opened it, everything of value had been stolen, including a garden tractor . . ."

THE PREACHER AND THE LOCKED SHED

by JOHN HUDSON TINER

The Preacher sat at the weekly staff meeting of Freedholder Enterprises. Most people found it disconcerting to look at him. His features had an unfinished quality, as if an artist had sketched his face but hadn't yet completed the portrait. The Preacher asked, "Who is Ricky Encina and why are you saying these terrible things about him?"

It was the first time he'd spoken and those around the table looked at him uneasily.

Morgan Freedholder had reassured his department chiefs at the previous staff meeting. "He's not a threat to himself or to anyone else. His doctor states that the strain of any legally binding contract would cause him to regress. The Preacher has been declared legally insane. Otherwise, he's—well, not perfectly normal, but he's not a wall-eyed lunatic, either. He's still ordained and shall act as my personal ethical advisor."

Since Morgan Freedholder owned the company, he didn't have to explain his actions. In fact, adding an ethical advisor to his staff wasn't his idea. It was the price he'd paid to keep his wife at his defense table during a long criminal trial. If his secretary and his wife had *both* testified for the state, his lawyers would have worked on a plea bargain rather than the successful not-guilty defense.

He thought his wife's idea was crazy. When the Preacher's story surfaced in the newspapers, he approached the man to put him on his staff. There was something deliciously unorthodox about having a certifiably insane employee on his staff.

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Lucy Spalding, the director of personnel, addressed the Preacher's question about Ricky Encina. She was thirty-five years old, speed-walked three times a week, and read the dietary label on everything she ate. She said, "As a one-year probationary employee, he can be summarily dismissed. We encourage the departments to rid themselves of employees with poor performance. By keeping only the best workers, they have no excuse for failing to meet departmental goals."

The Preacher asked, "Is Mr. Encina a marginal employee?"

Tom Whitney, chief of buildings and grounds, responded. He was the only man at the meeting not wearing a tie. "No, he's an exceptionally good employee. However, the burglary couldn't have been done without his cooperation. The facts make nonsense of his story."

"What is his story?" the Preacher asked.

Tom Whitney said, "Ricky is the grounds keeper who works in the afternoon. Last Friday evening, he closed and locked the equipment shed. Monday morning when I opened it, everything of value had been stolen, including a garden tractor."

The Preacher asked, "Why are you so sure Ricky is guilty?"

"It's a dead open-and-shut case!" Lucy Spalding snapped. She fixed a stony gaze on the Preacher. "You'd be wise to avoid taking his side in the matter."

Tom Whitney said, "The lock hadn't been tampered with. The door hadn't been forced open. It's the only entrance and the rest of the building was intact. No one broke in. But when I opened the equipment shed, it had been cleaned out."

Lucy Spalding said, "At best he forgot to lock the door, which shows he's negligent. At worst he stole the things himself."

Tom Whitney reluctantly agreed. "I have one key to the lock and the guard force has the other. The other key was itself under lock and key last weekend. Ricky works in the afternoon, so he merely locks the padlock on the door, never opens it, so he doesn't have a key."

The Preacher asked, "Could the lock have been picked?"

"The police found no marks that show a picklock in use. The value of the stolen property is so small that the police have—"

Morgan Freedholder had quickly grown bored with the discussion. "This isn't the great Brinks robbery," he said. He waved a hand at the Preacher. "Why don't you look into the matter?"

That afternoon, the Preacher found the young grounds keeper on his knees working the soil by a sidewalk. The young man was short

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and stocky, his hair black and curly, and he worked with big capable hands. He looked up with a quick smile when the Preacher said his name.

The Preacher explained his mission and asked, "Could you have forgotten to lock the shed?"

"I didn't forget," Ricky said. "Mr. Whitney opened the door Friday morning and hung the padlock by the door. Before going off work late Friday, I remember taking the lock and snapping the door closed."

"Are you happy here?" the Preacher asked.

Ricky stood and brushed his knees. He scooped up the rich soil and worked it through his fingers. "I have the best job here," he said. He pointed to the yellow flowers. "The crocuses are blooming early this year. When I ordered them, no one asked about the benefits. Instead, they questioned the cost. The cost of two thousand crocuses was nothing compared to the overall budget, so I was able to purchase and plant them."

The young man's eyes grew troubled. "When I'm gone, will they eliminate my position entirely? Will they border the sidewalks with crushed stone instead of flowers, and concrete over the gardens and put in metal benches? There should be someone to stand up for the crocuses."

"Will you show me the equipment shed?" the Preacher asked.

The building was a small metal one in back of the office building, hidden by shrubs. It rested on a concrete pad. It was windowless and ordinary in every way. The entrance doors swung outward like barn doors.

Tom Whitney was supervising delivery of equipment to replace the stolen items. "Hello, Preacher. Any progress?"

Lucy Spalding came strolling over and spoke to Tom Whitney, pointedly ignoring both the Preacher and Ricky Encina. "Ricky failed to report for his exit interview," she said. "Today is his last day."

The Preacher removed the heavy padlock from the hasp where it had been hung. "Suppose I can show that what the young man says is possible—that he actually locked the door and during the night someone else gained access?"

The personnel director shook her head. "I concurred with Mr. Whitney's original decision to end his employment. I see no reason to change that opinion now."

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Tom Whitney hesitated. "I want to believe Ricky. If you can come up with some other explanation of the facts, I'll throw my support behind him."

The Preacher said, "All of you, including Ricky, meet me here tomorrow morning. Don't unlock the equipment shed until I arrive."

The next morning, Tom Whitney, Lucy Spalding, and Ricky Encina were waiting at the locked building when Morgan Freedholder joined them. Secretly, he thought of the Preacher as a trained seal, an amusing animal who could provide a little diversion to an otherwise grim workday.

"Where is that man?" Lucy Spalding complained.

The Preacher appeared as she spoke. Once again, Morgan Freedholder could only marvel at the man's otherworldly appearance. The Preacher's shoes were so scuffed it looked like he walked everywhere. His suit was worn and his coat hung crookedly from something heavy in one pocket. His tie was slightly askew, his face red and wind-blown, his hair thick and unruly.

Tom Whitney started to open the padlock.

"Here," the Preacher said. "Let me." He quickly inserted a key that he carried, turned it, snapped the lock free, and threw open the doors. Inside, a large white banner with hand-printed letters read: THE PREACHER WAS HERE.

"All right," Lucy Spalding challenged. "How did you get Tom's key?"

"I didn't," the Preacher said. "It's my key. It doesn't even fit the padlock."

"What kind of foolishness is this?" Lucy asked.

The Preacher closed the door and locked it again. "See," he said. "My key doesn't work." He tried the key but it failed to spring the lock.

Tom Whitney tried his key. He unlocked the padlock, opened the doors, and hung the lock on the hasp. "All right, I'm properly mystified. What's going on?"

Ricky Encina said, "Hey, there's another padlock in the hedge over here."

The Preacher said, "I'm afraid you're giving away the secret to the mystery. That's the padlock I opened a few minutes ago. I tossed it aside while you were looking at my banner."

"All right, explain yourself," Lucy Spalding insisted.

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The Preacher said, "Mr. Whitney opened the door last Friday morning and hung the lock on the hasp."

"Right," Tom Whitney agreed. "I always do."

The Preacher continued, "Sometime on Friday, during normal business hours, the thief came here. While no one was looking, he took down your lock and put his own lock in its place. Later, you locked the gate but didn't notice that the padlocks had been switched because they look so much alike."

Tom Whitney nodded. "Most padlocks do look alike."

"That night the thief came back, opened the door with his key, and cleaned out the shed. He locked it, but this time he used the original padlock, the one he'd stolen during the day. So when Tom Whitney opened the gate Monday morning, he had no way of knowing the thief had switched the locks."

"I understand," Ricky said. "The shed was locked, all right, but with the thief's lock."

The Preacher nodded. "Last night I merely repeated what I believe the thief may have done."

"You have *not* identified the culprit!" Lucy Spalding said.

The Preacher replied calmly, "I didn't promise to catch the thief, but merely show a set of circumstances that would allow us to take Ricky's statements at face value. I've shown how the crime *could* have been committed. From now on, you should lock the padlock while it's hanging idle during the day. Give Ricky a key so he can unlock it and bolt the door. That way you'll know there hasn't been a substitution."

"Isn't your suggestion like locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen?" Lucy said sarcastically.

The Preacher said, "Well, I expect they'll be buying another horse."

She started to reply, but Morgan Freedholder quieted her with an uplifted hand. Perhaps his trained seal could do more than merely amuse. He said, "I'm satisfied. The young man stays."

Ricky smiled. "Score one for the crocuses."

"Q"

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a *NEW* Rosetta Street story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

As tactfully as he knew how, over their bread, cheese, and pickles lunch at The Other Pub, around the corner from Rosetta Street police station, Nick Flinders again aired his doubts to the young new owner of the Malreward Theater. This neighborhood was notorious on several counts, patronage of the arts not being among them. The Malreward Theater could present Lloyd Webber's Phantom of the Opera *with Michael Crawford back in the lead role, tickets half price, and the rest of London might still consider the cost too high if it involved venturing the wrong side of Great Northern Prospect.*

Speaking of phantoms, we present . . .

THE BRICK OVERCOAT

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Nick Flinders was surprised to see scaffolding around the Malreward Theater. The place had been derelict for years and everyone expected it to be knocked down rather than given a new lease of life. Older folk with memories wanted to see the last of that florid building with its decayed grandeur and green-copper dome. For the Malreward was aptly named, and on occasions those rewards had been lethal.

Albert Hands, jobbing builder, cackled, "Read the papers, Sarge. Jenny Penny's bought this place. She reckons to start up a proper the-ayter again. These film stars, they get a few bob in their pockets and they go mad. Still, it's a godsend to me."

"Genevieve, not Jenny," Detective-Constable Aitcheson corrected when Flinders shared the news. "And she's not a film star. Genevieve

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Penny acts in films. There's a difference." Aitcheson cared about such things.

"Films, you say?" Inspector Caradoc sighed. "Then there'll be trouble. Sexy piece with more money than sense. What's the matter with the wretched woman? This place is for getting out of when you strike it rich, not for coming to afterwards."

He had a point. In the ardently criminal triangle of London bounded by Rosetta Street, Cap-a-Pie Lane, and Great Northern Prospect, it is always open season on moneyed newcomers, especially females.

Detective-Sergeant Flinders met Jenny Penny soon after her arrival. Crime-prevention briefing to new owners of business premises—and the Malreward Theater came under that heading—was among his duties. He liked her on sight. Far from the sexy piece of Inspector Caradoc's stereotype, she was a cheerful, fiercely plain young person with freckles.

"Thanks for caring, but there'll be nothing worth stealing for weeks yet." Her temporary office was a cardtable, folding chair, and a row of rusty filing cabinets arranged on the theater's mezzanine floor, above the foyer. The whole place smelled of sawdust and fresh plaster.

"You don't know this neighborhood," Flinders said grimly. "The lads of the village nick stuff just to stay in practice. We're not talking Great Train Robbers, mind. More, dozens of kids, not to mention their dads and a few mums, who'd think it a big score to walk off with a gallon of paint or a power drill. Start a fire on their way out, by way of a joke. If you don't want security guards, at least put a dog in at night."

"You're a pessimist, Sergeant. I'm having a public meeting this week to explain our aims. The Malreward will be an Off Off Broadway-type operation, unlikely to appeal to the community. But I'll run free drama classes for jobless people and children. Pensioners as well, if they're interested. Once it's known that we're here to help, they won't steal." She reacted to his expression, breaking off to ask: "There's a flaw in my reasoning?"

"Not half. You can be Mother Teresa and the Tooth Fairy rolled into one—this lot will still rip you off something rotten."

"But that would be like sawing off the branch they're sitting on!" she protested.

Nick grinned wolfishly. "Now you're getting the idea." Jenny was an idealist who might learn the hard way. He didn't want her taught

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in that manner. So he interceded with Inspector Daintry of the uniformed side for extra attention to the theater, and made it his business to drop in regularly.

Ironically, the actress took to teasing him over the lack of security problems as renovations progressed. Unaware of the reason for immunity, she accused him of seeing only the worst side of Rosetta Streeters. "I expect you're right, luv," he would concede, his rather thuggish face mirroring her smile. Except that he was amused for different reasons.

Once Nick slipped into the theater and watched part of a rehearsal from a shadowed seat in the circle. Jenny impressed him. She was directing, and the schoolgirl aura had vanished. In its place he found a committed professional. And once he and Jenny had a bread, cheese, and pickles lunch at The Other Pub, around the corner from Rosetta Street police station. As tactfully as he knew how, he again aired his doubts. This neighborhood was notorious on several counts, patronage of the arts not being among them. The Malreward Theater could present Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* with Michael Crawford back in the lead role, tickets half price, and the rest of London might still consider the cost too high if it involved venturing the wrong side of Great Northern Prospect.

"Oh, it's not about making *money!*" she cried. "When the kitty runs low, I'll do some stupid movie to top it up again. You're such a worrier, Nick. Everything's going to be great."

The Malreward Theater had a grand opening night, covered by the national press and several TV crews. (Final score, one mini-cam and three hundred feet of heavy-duty cable stolen, a gossip columnist mugged while seeking a taxi at midnight.) Despite Nick's reservations, the plays did quite well, experimental drama attracting students and arts-underground patrons who tended to be poorer and scruffier than local folk, therefore unworried by street-crime hazards. Jenny's free acting classes enjoyed success among pensioners happy to play games for the sake of company, a change of venue, and a cup of tea.

"It's like the old days," Cedric Challenor told Detective-Sergeant Flinders. "Fancy a slip of a girl bringing the ol' Malreward back to life!"

Cedric, nearer seventy than sixty, though spry enough save for his game leg, had reason for gratitude. Jenny Penny hired him as stage doorkeeper, a post lost by Mr. Challenor in 1981 when the

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Malreward closed down. And for years before that, Cedric had been sadly reduced—handyman during the theater's period as a bingo hall.

Jenny found a flat in the neighborhood. As the months passed, Flinders noted a dampening of her spirits. Honeymoon period over was his cynical conclusion. Welcome to the real world, my dear—this patch being about as real as they came.

"That name's a sick joke," Inspector Caradoc snarled. Harry Angell was one of his bugbears. "My son Emlyn farms back home in Wales. If he catches a stray dog near his sheep, then it's up with his trusty twelve-bore and bang—goodbye, pooch. All legal, see. If you're a dodgy dog and want to stay out of the great kennel in the sky, then mind your manners and steer clear of innocent sheep."

"Can't see you with a shotgun, Skipper."

"I can," Caradoc murmured wistfully. "Just one day's license and wouldn't I have a bag! Picture it, Nick—Harry Angell flat on his back and me in my shooting togs, one foot on his chest." Then he frowned and said, "Enough frivolity, now," as if Flinders were the culprit.

"What's he been up to, sir? Angell keeps a low profile these days, far as I know."

"Maybe. Something's in the air, though. I hear that Noddy Hake is in the hospital, extensive injuries. Hake and Harry Angell have a history, right? One gets up to strokes, then the other tries to put a spoke in. Talk to Noddy Hake, he dislikes you less than some of us, Nick. If Angell's given him a bloody good hiding, and that's the likeliest explanation, Noddy may be hurting in more ways than one. That makes a feller spiteful and talkative—we hope."

Noddy Hake turned out to have a private room in St. Asaph's Hospital. Flinders found the patient recovering though unhappy, with a suspected jaw fracture and a certainly broken arm.

Face plum-colored from bruising, Hake glowered at his visitor. "All I need, you are."

Nick wanted to laugh. That bandaged jaw gave Noddy, who had as much class as a plastic teaspoon, a suggestion of Noel Coward's clipped, affected speech.

"Dropped in to wish you better, Norman." Hake detested his nickname. "Traffic accident, was it? Or the other excuse, slipped in the bath?"

"Get stuffed." Hake wasn't in Coward's league for epigrams.

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The policeman sat beside the bed. "Funny, I always pegged you as the one who put blokes in places like this. Getting old, Norm, losing the edge. Time was you could have handled him."

Hake's fat fingers, peeping from the cast on his right arm, curled convulsively. "Try handling Angell *and* his army, see how *you* get on."

"Serves you right. You've got the porn shops, the mini-cabs and that. No call to go stirring trouble, meddling with whatever Angell is into these days."

"Meddle? Not me, I'd not never do what he does!" Noddy Hake's panda-ringed eyes burned. "Mad dog," he whispered, unwittingly echoing Inspector Caradoc's fantasy. "Man's gone potty. I never took his— Here, I'm saying nothing."

Nick, mock innocent, asked, "You'll not be making a formal complaint then, Norman?"

Hake sniggered contempt, modified to snuffling as pain bit. "I fell over in the bath. Now shove off."

"They never grass," Flinders reminded Inspector Caradoc. "But Noddy let a few things slip. Angell had him seen to, we got that right. The spanking came about through suspecting Noddy had ripped him off. Noddy was very bitter about that. When he comes the 'not never' line, he really means it. Said he'd not never get involved in Angell's current business."

Caradoc decoded the cryptic utterance. "Drugs?" Noddy Hake's schoolgirl daughter had run away from home years before, getting hooked on heroin and dying of an overdose. Narcotics were just about the only villainy her father shunned.

"Looks that way, Skipper. What's more, Noddy reckons Harry Angell came at him mob-handed. I've never known Angell to use help before."

Caradoc's eyebrows went up. "What are you getting at?"

"My guess is Harry Angell *has* gone into the drugs lark. I'll squeeze my informers, and I bet they say he's had a consignment nicked off him somehow. Hence Noddy Hake in hospital, hence Angell's break with the habit of a lifetime, hiring a full-scale team. There has to be big money involved."

"Let's go canny on this," Inspector Caradoc decreed. "Noddy didn't steal the stuff, eh? No, he wouldn't. Angell can't be thinking straight. Big money, as you said—he's in a panic. I'm going to rope Super-

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intendent Viztelli in. He's running that new Drugs Task Force—should be right up his alley."

He paused, his hand on the phone. "Unless Angell's recovered the stuff by now. Tell you what, if anyone else turns up folded, spindled, or mutilated, we'll know he's still looking."

As if on cue, Detective-Constable Aitcheson bustled into the CID room. "There's been a fracas at the Diamond filling station. Uniformed boys want assistance, sir. There's blood all over the forecourt and the owner, a chap called Selig, is in a bad way. But he won't say who attacked him or why."

"We're in business," the Inspector beamed, dialing Superintendent Viztelli's direct-line number. Citizen Selig's filling station was a sideline, a front, or both. Selig's true trade was robbery—his speciality: thieving from other thieves.

Viztelli's unit worked iceberg fashion, mostly undercover. Nick accepted the need-to-know secrecy involved. He was sardonically amused to find a new figure around the manor, a towering Rastafarian, ghetto blaster on shoulder, hanging around the little park halfway along Great Northern Prospect. The park happened to overlook a pub called the Prince Consort, Harry Angell happened to drink there, and the Rasta man happened to be Detective-Sergeant Winston Devlin—they'd met on a Home Office course. He hoped Winston was enjoying his new post on the Task Force.

There was gossip when Angell, a used-car dealer for tax purposes, sold his showroom and workshop near the Prince Consort. Stupid move, during the property slump. Obviously his stolen treasure remained missing and he needed working capital in a hurry.

Albert Hands, the builder who had renovated the Malreward Theater, was courting Nick's landlady. Albert was a widower. His sweetheart's husband, sweating out an eighteen-month assignment on a Dubai oil-rig, might not approve, but it wasn't a police matter. Flinders came in one evening to find Albert toying with canned salmon and Mrs. Bald's affections. "Not much of a homebird, are you, Sarge? I've been trying all week to catch you for a private word. Something's the matter with Miss Penny—she's dead depressed."

"Probably in shock after getting your final bill—double the original estimate, with your phone number added on," Nick suggested.

"Leave off. I'm *strickly* honest as builders go. Nah, something's up. I wondered—you know, she's supposed to have plenty of money.

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Maybe some bright spark is leaning on her, pushing the kind of insurance you don't get from the City."

"She *has* been a bit long-faced lately," Nick agreed. "Okay, Bert. I'll chat her."

The Malreward being between productions, Jenny needed little persuasion to have dinner with him that evening. He was framing questions, over the starters, when Jenny began asking her own. And the first one floored him.

"You must be an expert on slang, Nick. Have you ever heard of—" she was studying the tablecloth, avoiding eye contact, but he heard the strain in her voice as she finished "—a brick overcoat?"

It sounded so lunatic that he was embarrassed on her behalf. "Brick overcoat? No, I haven't come across that. Concrete overcoat, maybe. I remember that from old gangster films."

"But it's not local lingo?" Jenny persisted.

"Doubt it. It sounds daft."

She smiled tautly. "No, it sounds like a threat. Gangster movies, you said."

He kept it casual, no more than polite interest. "Somebody threatening you, are they?"

Jenny countered question with question. "Do you know the Malreward Theater is jinxed?"

"News to me," Nick lied. Backpedaling under her stare, he added: "I don't believe in jinxes, anyway. Half the things said about that place are fairy tales, so don't go losing sleep, my girl."

Jenny pushed the avocado away, mangled rather than tasted. "Fact, not fairy tales. I knew the Malreward had a, well, sinister reputation, but rather later in the day I've been researching it. Marcus Malreward built the place as a showcase for his wife in the 1880s, but she died of consumption before the foundation stone was laid and he cut his throat on the building site. Hetty Vaux, star comedienne of her day, was first to appear at the Malreward, and she went bankrupt and crazy, in that order, the same year. In 1949, Christmas pantomime season, some fool raised a false alarm of fire during a matinee and a child was trampled to death."

Nick was reassuring. "So? People have to die somewhere. Take a public building that's been around for more than a century, the law of averages tells you there will be a tragedy or two."

As if he hadn't spoken, she whispered, "I thought that damned

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place was cold because it had been derelict so long. It's not that. The theater is haunted."

She laughed raggedly. "Stage people are superstitious—never mention *Macbeth* during the run of a show, call it the Scottish play, all that rot. Half the theaters in England are supposed to be haunted. I didn't believe a word of it. Buying the Malreward is poetic justice on me."

"You think," he said neutrally, "that you've seen a ghost. Is that what's got you down?"

Again the laugh, scouring his nerves. "No, I haven't seen a ghost. That's something I have no wish to see. But I—*heard* it. I did, Nick. It said it would make me a b–brick overcoat." Nervousness and depression weren't the half of it. She was scared.

Her story was weird enough to account for that fear. An account impossible for skeptical Sergeant Flinders to credit, but by the same token he accepted that Jenny believed it.

For weeks, she explained, she had felt uneasy while alone in the Malreward Theater—and as its workaholic owner she was alone for hours at a time. "I'm not one of those women kidding themselves they're psychic, Nick. But I got this nagging hunch that I wasn't the only person in the building. But Cedric Challenor is conscientious—he checks the place from foyer to roof before going home. Then he gives me the key to a side exit and locks everything else behind him."

At first, she told Nick, there had been the conviction of having company. Then came hints of a presence—tiny noises, a door found ajar after she had shut it.

"But the worst thing was when it spoke to me." She frowned impatiently at Nick's puzzlement. "*It*—whatever infests the Malreward. I was walking downstairs to the foyer around ten-thirty the other night. I'd been reading scripts, not realizing how late it was. Cedric leaves the staircase lit—just one lamp, not the full run of wall-lights, so it's shadowy. I started down and—laugh, make a wisecrack, and I'll kill you—the, uh, the ghost spoke to me."

Jenny's laced fingers were bloodless from pressure. She attempted a smile. "More of a whisper—male, I believe. Sort of teasing, like a child jeering at grown-ups. It said: 'Pretty Jenny, busy Jenny. Play your cards right, I'll make you a brick overcoat.' "

Her glance was defiant. "It doesn't sound much. But I can't forget it. Now, when I'm there on my own, all the lights stay on. It's costing

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me a fortune, but I don't care." Anticipating his objection, she spoke quickly. "It had to be—supernatural. A spook. As I say, the light was dim. But that whisper was right in my ear. If somebody was that close, I had to see them. But I didn't. Not for want of trying, either—I wanted it to be human." Her tone turned stubborn. "The Malreward has a ghost who doesn't like me. Wants to make me a brick overcoat. Put me in a crypt, could that mean? I can't work in that place any more. And I'll be letting everyone down. It will seem that I got carried away by a fad and then lost interest. I can't make the real reason public, the press would make a meal of the whole thing before accusing me of a cheap publicity stunt." She sighed. "Everything I just told you is confidential, Nick. Not for onward transmission, okay?"

"Fair enough. Your risotto's going cold."

Jenny, disconcerted, snapped, "You still don't believe in ghosts."

"I believe," Nick said placidly, "in checking things out. I'm on late turn tomorrow, so the morning is free. Let's meet at the theater."

"Oh, dear, Miss Penny has been telling you about her ghost. Wants it arrested, I suppose?" Doorkeeper Cedric Challenor's long upper lip and melancholy brown eyes gave him a faint resemblance to a chimpanzee—a kindly, mild-mannered specimen. But Cedric was miffed. Sergeant Flinders had arrived early at the Malreward Theater not by chance. He wanted the veteran's version.

"Lot of nonsense," Cedric scoffed. "Imagination. Old houses always creak and make funny noises, what with floorboards and the wind and the plumbing. This is the biggest old house in the borough."

Nick nodded understandingly. They were in the foyer, and the checkerboard marble floor and fumed-oak woodwork made the space seem funereal. At night, alone, it might not take much to spook anyone.

"You don't think it's haunted?"

" 'Course not. Too many enjoyed theirselves here, not counting a few mishaps years back." The old man patted the ornate newel post of the grand staircase at whose foot they stood.

Nick was reminded of a groom petting his stableyard favorite. "Right. I've been through the premises with you, ground level up—but there must be a basement, cellars, or whatever."

Cedric said, "There's nobody down there, just the boiler room and a lot of old junk—broken seats and that."

Nick was impassive, but he had a connoisseur's ear for false notes.

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Why would the doorkeeper say *nobody* down there instead of nothing? Interesting. "Better take a look, all the same," he said.

The old man pouted. "I can't do those steps—spiral staircase, iron, more than my life's worth. Here's the key. The door's over there, Sergeant. I'll be out the back if you need me again."

Filing the minor riddle at the back of his mind—Cedric was that Rosetta Street rarity, an honest man, so whatever he kept to himself was unlikely to be serious—Nick explored the bowels of the Malreward Theater. They were extensive, an untidy labyrinth of grimy brick cells. There were hanging lights in dusty tin shades, and he supplemented the feeble illumination with a long fat torch throwing the beam of a dwarf searchlight.

As half expected, he found hints that somebody had spent time down there: wicker props-baskets arranged as a makeshift bed, a ragged blanket nearby none too clean but free of mustiness. Some decidedly recent fish-and-chip wrappings were wedged behind piping. All might have been fragments of the junk mentioned by Cedric, but Nick doubted it.

He was nonplused, on reaching the end of one passage, to see daylight streaming through a rusty iron ventilation grill in the wall. Switching off the torch, he studied the street-plan in his head. Then he understood. The land fell away steeply behind the building. One entered the Malreward Theater at street level from Great Northern Prospect, but this side of the basement lay at ground level on another, lower street. Bearings lost, Nick couldn't work out the source of the daylight.

When he used the torch again, he spotted the metal-sheathed door below the ventilator. He peered at the lock and married it to a key on Cedric's bunch. Still, the door held firm. "Bolts," he muttered: Victorian giants sliding inches into the brickwork, top and bottom. Slide they did, though, easily. "Somebody oiled you, well within living memory," he said.

Door open at last, he stepped into a roofless dungeon. Dallet Street, he decided. This was a hidden courtyard at the back of a Dallet Street building. The windowless rear wall of the Malreward formed one face of the narrow rectangle. Brick buttresses flanked the cellar door, blocking each end. And the dungeon's fourth side was the back wall of the Dallet Street building.

Like the theater's, the opposite wall had no windows at Nick's level. But its next floor, about ten feet up, showed a smeary oblong

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of glass, protected by close-set iron bars. A shop's storeroom, no doubt.

Satisfied, though no wiser, Nick retreated inside, locking and bolting the door. Why a door at all, with no means of leaving that courtyard beyond it? Ah, but that was the point—the space couldn't be entered from Dallet Street, while workmen might need to reach brickwork or drainage pipes outside either building.

Time to go—Jenny must have arrived by now. Hurrying toward the spiral staircase, Nick got the shock of his life.

Terrifyingly, an invisible creature pawed his cheek before threatening to envelop him. Nick cursed shrilly for a man not believing in ghosts, struck out, grazed his knuckles on the wall, and cursed again. The thing, surprise attack botched, fled. Nick used the torch and felt a surge of relief.

It was a bit of cloth, that was all—a muddle of limp canvas lying on the floor, and there was the nail on which it had hung, to be brushed free as he touched it while passing. He hadn't seen the thing because this section of passage, halfway between a brace of hanging lamps, was dark and the torch's strong yet narrow beam had been aimed straight ahead.

On the staircase where the electric light was stronger, Nick examined the trophy. No wonder he had walked within inches of the stuff on the way in without spotting it. The cloth was camouflaged—a regular pattern of faded red or ochre blocks, separated by narrow gutters of greyish paint. And it wasn't just a piece of cloth, but a roughly sewn garment—a smock, really.

"Bless my soul," Nick observed. He was holding the brick overcoat.

Jenny waited at the top of the stairs. Nick had the overcoat turned inside out and tucked under his arm. "Your office, luv, in five minutes. I have something to attend to first."

Cedric Challenor's snug berth was just inside the stage door of the Malreward. Brass fittings gleamed and a gas fire purred in the corner, imitating the lazy rumble of a fat tabby cat drowsing on the windowsill. Nick's manner wasn't the least cosy, however.

"No more playing stupid, Cedric—I know better. You've been At It. Had a lodger here on the sly, down there in the basement. No wonder Jenny was sure somebody else was around after you'd gone home. Nice way to carry on, seeing she gave you your job back." He smiled bleakly. "Taking one thing with another, you could quite easily be mistaken for an ungrateful old toe-rag."

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Challenor gulped miserably. "It wasn't like that, Sergeant Flinders."

"What was it like, then?"

"Oliver," Cedric told him. "He's my brother, see. Ten years younger. I've always tried to look out for him. He was all right till the accident—a topnotch craftsman, a terrific scenery bloke, he could paint anything and make it lifelike. But the winter of '66, somebody hadn't lashed a spotlight proper and it fell on him. Ollie wasn't never the same after. Not right in the head. No danger to nobody, just—childish."

Oliver Challenor, his big brother explained, had been in a mental institution for the past quarter century or so. Then the government started closing such places and "returning inmates to the community." Radical therapy and, purely by chance, a way to cut welfare budgets.

"A matter of two months ago they turned poor Ollie out, gave him a train ticket to London. He was upset, scared. A nurse phoned me and I went down there to Surrey and brought him home. But I'm in just the one room. My sister said she'd take him in—she lives in Essex, the seaside—but then she went into the hospital. The landlord cut up rough about two of us sharing the room. What could I do?"

"Smuggle him in here," Nick said. "I get the picture. You must be as cracked as he is, Cedric. That basement isn't fit for habitation."

"It was only for a little while, till my sister was home again. Ollie liked it there. He knows theaters. And he's docile, Sergeant Flinders. I told him to make sure Miss Penny had left every night before he took a breath of air upstairs here. But when she started the ghost stuff, I knew Oliver must have been playing tricks. So I splurged on a hotel for him for two-three days, and then my sister collected him."

"Oliver knows theaters, and he knows about painting," Nick said, unrolling the canvas coat and turning it right side out. "He made this to use downstairs, and outside in that courtyard—a cloak-of-invisibility kind of style."

Cedric Challenor gaped at the thing, aghast.

"I wondered what happened to that. I'd told him to get rid of it."

"Why, Cedric? Come on, I'll find out anyway. Same as I did about Oliver having been here."

The old man's face was shiny with sweat. "I promise you he meant no harm. I put everything back, made him hand all the stuff over every day before I'd give him his food. Never important things,

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just—a glass doorknob from the ladies' room, say, or ashtrays and that. He wasn't sticky-fingered before the accident. Now he takes things. Pretty things, or stuff that looks interesting, like parcels."

"Human magpie, and you invited him in," Nick said despairingly. "What are we to do with you?"

Cedric ran a hand over his face. "I should go to Miss Jenny and make a clean breast of it."

"Better late than never, I suppose. If she doesn't press charges—and, knowing her, it's unlikely—you're off the hook."

Hardly ten minutes elapsed before Cedric shambled back to his post. "She's a saint," he announced, close to tears. "Told me to forget it, long as I don't do nothing like that again. And if I have to help support Oliver, she'll give me a raise. Sack a chap? She doesn't know how to spell the word, bless her."

"Bully for you. Have you told me everything, Cedric? How did he do the ghost stuff? It had to be your brother whispering in Jenny's shell-like that night—he was the only one into brick overcoats."

"Search me, Sergeant Flinders. I asked him if he'd been frightening her, and he swore he never had. Ollie doesn't lie. He took a fancy to her. 'Pretty Jenny, busy Jenny,' he called her. Crept upstairs of an evening to catch sight of her, but she never saw him."

Nick shrugged, abandoning the riddle, and went upstairs to Jenny's office. He found her looking happier. "Ghost exorcised?" he teased.

"I'm not wild about having been spied on night after night, but at least whatshisname, Oliver, was *real*. Cedric assures me he's miles away now and won't come back." But still she frowned.

"Forget the phantom voice," Nick urged. "That was Oliver again." He unrolled the bundle. "Here's the brick overcoat. Not a threat, see. Ollie had one for camouflage. He liked you—he was thinking of making another, as a gift."

Jenny's nose wrinkled. "Horrid thing. *Not* my style."

"Works a treat, though."

"Not up here," she disagreed. Indeed the painted canvas contrasted starkly to the blue carpet and cream walls. They were standing outside her office, at the top of the grand staircase and beneath the great bell of the Malreward Theater's dome. Glancing up, Nick thought of another London building and an idea took form.

"Were you out here when you heard that whisper?"

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"Yes. I'd shut the office door behind me and started to come downstairs."

"Okay, stay where you are. Light left on, you said. This one here?" He indicated a wall lamp some six feet away.

"That's the one. There's a switch downstairs to shut it off. It works independently of the rest on this floor."

Nick backed along the curving landing. "When I'm beyond range of that light, sing out, luv. Imagine it's after dark."

She gave the word when he was about twenty feet distant. "If it was nighttime, you'd be invisible there, Nick. So what?"

Only just audibly, Nick whispered, "Testing, one, two, three—Mary had a little lamb." The response was gratifying. Jenny started, her head whipping left and right, evoking Wimbledon tennis and spectators of a fierce rally. "How did you *do* that?" she cried.

"Just said it under my breath. Same way Ollie did, never realizing how a whisper can carry here. Must be the dome, Jenny. Whispering-gallery effect, same as St. Paul's, only that one is a famous tourist attraction. I read somewhere that it's quite a common freak of architecture. You try."

He saw her lips move. And there came a murmur in his ear—"What a detective!" Which did no harm to his ego. But the best was yet to come.

A few days afterward, Nick glanced up from his desk, startled by the sight of Detective-Inspector Caradoc entering the CID room in an absurdly bouncy manner. "Go ahead, laugh at the silly old fool. There's a spring in my step, Nick. Viztelli's team nailed Harry Angell last night—Harry, a Central American citizen with a very dodgy Belgian passport, and a hatload of cocaine. We will have seen the last of Mr. Angell for a few years."

He rubbed his hands. "There are those who snigger at Superintendent Viztelli and his cloak-and-dagger games. Not me, not after this. I'd have given a week's pay to have been there when Angell sneaked into his safe house in Dallet Street, made the buy—and found Viztelli peering over his shoulder!"

"Dallet Street?"

"Yes, one of those scruffy little shops with flats above. Seems that Harry Angell bought the place through his solicitor last year. Closed the shop, evicted the folk in the flats, spread a story the place was going to be redeveloped, and kept it empty. Perfect crib for storing

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hot items and doing business on the quiet. Hello, you've gone a very funny color—feeling all right?"

"Excuse me, Skipper. Something I forgot to do," Flinders told him truthfully.

"I told you everything first time of asking," Cedric Challenor insisted. The old chap showed irritation, nothing more. But as Flinders had divined when Dallet Street cropped up in Inspector Caradoc's gloating, Harry Angell's safe house was right behind the Malreward Theater. The rear of the empty shop formed one wall of that strange little courtyard accessible from the theater's basement.

"Your brother Oliver pinches stuff. Parcels, you told me the other day. What put that example into your head?" Nick didn't pause for a reply. "Just for the sake of argument, supposing Oliver was mooching about outside after dark, invisible in his brick overcoat, and he spotted a parcel as it might be through a window? How could he have gotten hold of it?"

"He never went outside." Cedric was triumphant. "Never set foot beyond this place. I'd drummed that into him. The farthest he ever went was the basement yard, between here and Dallet Stree— Blimey!"

"Well said. Keep going."

Cedric wriggled on his chair. "I never went down there—the stairs are too much for me. But sometimes of an early morning, before anyone else got in, I'd stick my head out the window on the top floor and catch Ollie in the courtyard. Just the once, he had a stepladder out there. Putting two and two together, I guessed what he was up to.

"I told him to stop it and he said he would. I wasn't concerned, Sergeant Flinders. The only Dallet Street windows he could reach from here belong to that shop what closed down months back. The place is empty. Even if Oliver had reached in there'd be nothing worth taking."

Nick stared at him, but Challenor was sincere.

"Indulge me, all the same," Nick said. "Like I was saying, Ollie gets up to a window and sees a parcel inside. Window's shut, there are bars outside. Only he's full of tricks, your brother. What trick did he use?"

"Oldest one in the book," Cedric admitted, mingling sheepishness and sly pride. He reached behind him, where an array of mops and

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brooms filled a corner of his cubbyhole. "I confiscated this, as soon as Ollie showed it to me."

He produced a broom handle with a spidery arm of straightened wire coat-hangers running its length. At its far end, the arm frayed out into a kind of triple-clawed hand. "Plenty of street thieves had these in the old days. Grampa must have shown Ollie how to make it. This one is a bit rough, but it serves.

"What you do is find a window open—or more likely slip the catch with a thin-bladed knife, maybe just a strip of tin, and push the sash up. Then you reach through with this—mind your back, Sergeant Flinders."

Challenor leaned forward on the stool, moved the clawed head of the broomstick past Nick, and at the third try captured a discarded cigarette packet from the floor several feet away. Red and wheezing from the tricky exercise, he chuckled. "Going fishing, the old boys called it. Grampa was a dab hand, and I daresay he trained my brother. Ollie was his favorite."

Nick was poker-faced. "All right, Cedric, put it away. Now think very hard. No fibs, straight talk. Did Oliver go fishing in the courtyard and hook a parcel?"

The old man held out for a full twenty seconds. "Don't you go putting words into my mouth, Sergeant. He'd been messing about behind that empty shop. One night we were on our ownsome and Ollie shows me this packet. Did it come from over there? Mebbe. But it was only rubbish, that's why we never put it back."

"Where's that package?"

Heedless of tension, the doorkeeper rambled, "Funny thing it was, plastic and masking tape wrapped round and round. All that trouble to wrap up rubbish."

Nick prodded the exasperating old fellow's chest. "What the hell are you on about?"

"I'm telling you," Cedric grumbled. "See, it was all wrapped up, and Ollie was on fire to see inside. Inquisitive, he is. Truth to tell, so was I. There was so much tape going every which way you couldn't peel it off. I got a razor blade and cut a little corner. Know what was in there? Salt." He wagged his head, half amused, half irked.

"Funny thing to do, pour out—oh, it must have been a pound or more of salt, wrap it up in plastic, wind tape round and round it. Kiddies having a game, maybe. Ollie was fit to be tied, going to all that trouble for a pound of salt. And wouldn't you know, it was stale. I'd bought fish 'n chips for us, see. We tried some of the salt on it,

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shame to waste it, then had to sling the chips away. There was something wrong with the salt. If it *was* salt. Cleaning powder, I shouldn't wonder. Tasted funny. I was lucky not to poison meself."

Flinders, awed, asked, "Was your mouth sort of numb afterwards?"

Cedric pondered, licking his lips. "Come to think of it, I fancy my mouth did prickle a bit. But I only ate a couple of chips, see. Once I got the taste, I spat the next one out and threw the rest in the garbage."

"What did you do with the parcel?"

"Flushed it down the toilet, of course. What good was it?"

Nick knew he was hearing the truth. "Weighed a pound or so," he repeated dreamily. He was estimating the street value of probably uncut cocaine. Then he thought of the grief Cedric and Oliver Challenor would experience if he shared the anecdote with Inspector Caradoc and Superintendent Viztelli.

Then he visualized the paperwork involved. And weighed that against the beneficial outcome of Ollie's kleptomania: Harry Angell sabotaged as a dealer and then coming unstuck while renewing his merchandise.

Ollie's brother was asking, "Are we in trouble? Just because I didn't turn him in for pinching some salt what was no good to nobody?"

Reaching a swift decision, Nick replied, "No, you're not in trouble. Unless you ever open your trap about any of this—salt, your brother, Dallet Street, fishing. It never happened, understand?"

"Suits me," said Cedric.

DETECTIVERSE

THE MARRIAGE DIDN'T TAKE

by REBECCA L. LaFORGE

There once was a crook named Clyde
Who took rich Nell for his bride—
But now Clyde is dead
From a bump on the head
And *Nell* is going to be tried.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

This past summer's Warren Beatty movie *Dick Tracy* may be the best film ever based on a comic strip, a visual feast with great supporting performances (not to mention makeup jobs) among the Tracy villains. More to this department's concerns, its appearance has precipitated a number of Dick Tracy books, including a novelization of the screenplay, a collection of short stories about Tracy by a wide variety of mystery and science-fiction writers, and a new gathering of some of the best comic-strip sequences about Chester Gould's manhunter. Involved in all three projects is the current writer of the Dick Tracy strip, Max Allan Collins.

I admit to a prejudice against novelizations. I understand the commercial point, but not the literary. Since I almost never read one, I can't say definitively that Collins's *Dick Tracy* (Bantam, $4.95) ranks among the best ever written, but I strongly suspect that's the case. Collins fills out the screenplay's action so well, adding scenes and characters not in the film, one could easily imagine the novel came first and was compressed and simplified for the movie. The treatment of Breathless Mahoney suggests how much a better actress than Madonna might have done with the role. (Note for collectors: the early printings, which were on the stands before the movie was in the theaters, offers a "censored" version, not including one of the film's key surprises. For the whole story, the author advises seeking out the fifth printing or later.)

Though some heavy hitters contribute, *Dick Tracy: The Secret Files* (Tor, $4.95), edited by Collins and Martin H. Greenberg, is not as impressive as Greenberg's 1989 compilation, *The Further Adventures of Batman*. One problem is that some of the stories (e.g., those by Wayne D. Dundee and Ed Gorman), though perfectly okay in themselves, have relatively little to do with Tracy, could in fact be about any fictional cop. The book begins well with Mike Resnick's "Origins," about struggling cartoonist Gould, who wants to do a crime strip when all the syndicates seem to want is funny animals, and ends strongly with Collins's "Not a Creature Was Stirring," which in its shocking finish seems a double homage to Tracy and Mike Hammer. Other contributors include Henry Slesar, Ron Goulart, Francis M. Nevins and Josh Pachter, Barry N. Malzberg, and Edward D. Hoch.

Appropriately enough, the best of the three Tracy items at hand is *The Dick Tracy Casebook: Favorite Adventures, 1931–1990* (St. Martin's, $15.95), a large-format paperback collecting seven black-and-white sequences from the great de-

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tective's real headquarters: the newspaper comic page. Selected and introduced by Collins and current strip artist Dick Locher are five adventures by Gould, Thirties through Sixties, one from the Seventies by Collins and Rick Fletcher, and one from the Eighties by Collins and Locher. Only the Fifties are represented by two adventures, and they are the book's best (the dazzling and inventive sage of "Crewy Lou") and worst (the soppy account of teenage Junior's romance with "Model"). Though the strip's current proprietors modestly assert "they will never approach even the vaguest outskirts of Chester Gould at his best," their "Man of a Million Faces" is a more than worthy addition to the saga, concerning the hunt for a classic Tracy villain, Putty Puss.

**** Ellis Peters: *The Potter's Field,* Mysterious, $16.95. It may be a longtime reader's imagination, but it seems to me that the always worthwhile series about Brother Cadfael—this is the seventeenth entry—is getting a second wind. Concerning the discovery of a woman's body in the Potter's Field recently given to the Abbey of St. Peter and St. Paul by a local landlord, this beautifully written tale of medieval detection ranks with the very best in the series.

**** Joe R. Lansdale: *Savage Season,* Bantam, $4.50. Narrator Hap Collins joins his manipulative ex-wife and several other aging Sixties radicals in an effort to recover the sunken loot from a years-ago robbery. Leonard Pine, a gay black who works with Hap in the rose fields, provides the cynical view to play off the ostensible true believers. This sexy, violent, and thoughtful caper, the work of a terrific writer who usually operates in the fantasy and horror genres, should get a long look from the Edgar committee for best paperback original.

*** Herbert Resnicow: *The Hot Place,* St. Martin's, $15.95. The second novel about the father-son detective team of Ed and Warren Baer concerns murder in the steam room of a Long Island country club, with a closed circle of mostly powerful and influential suspects. As usual, the author provides a sound fair-play puzzle, a knowledgably detailed background, and considerable human interest. Among Resnicow's various series, the Baer saga ranks second only to the books about Alexander and Norma Gold —and with this strong outing, the Baers may be gaining.

*** Ed Gorman: *A Cry of Shadows,* St. Martin's, $14.95. As a cold Christmas approaches, private eye Jack Dwyer is first asked, then unasked, to investigate a series of break-ins at a posh restaurant existing in uncomfortable proximity to a large homeless population. As always with Gorman, the writing is crisp and economical, the social observations acute, the people interesting. At a time when mysteries are tending to run longer and longer, not always to their benefit, Gorman shows how much plot, character, and incident can be crammed into less than 150 pages.

** Joe L Hensley: *Robak's Run,* Doubleday/Crime Club, $14.95.

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Midwestern lawyer Don Robak takes on two cases that may or may not be connected, defending a paroled burglar charged with murdering his wife and searching for the long-missing daughter of his stroke-impaired legal mentor, Judge Steinmetz. The latter investigation takes him from hometown Bington to grim Capitol City ("an aging whore masquerading as a gospel singer"). There are some nice touches, but generally the novel starts better than it finishes, marking it a below-average entry in a good series.

Recommended reprints include some highlights from decades past: Mark McShane's excellent 1961 novel of supernatural suspense, *Seance on a Wet Afternoon* (Carroll & Graf, $3.95); several John Dickson Carr titles, ranging from an early and highly theatrical 1932 Bencolin novel with a Parisian setting, *The Corpse in the Waxworks* (Harper/Perennial, $4.95), through a couple of much later historicals, 1959's *The Witch of the Low-Tide* and 1969's New Orleans-based, *The Ghosts' High Noon* (Carroll & Graff, $3.95 each); Michael Innes's 1943 Appleby novel *The Weight of the Evidence* (Harper/Perennial, $4.95), a prime example of the witty and satirical academic mystery; and from the admirable International Polygonics (Madison Square, P.O. Box 1563, New York, NY 10159) George Sanders' comic Hollywood mystery of 1944, *Crime on My Hands* ($7.95), which is actually the work of ghostwriter Craig Rice and subcontracting ghost Cleve Cartmill; a good 1940 John J. Malone novel by Rice as herself, *The Corpse Steps Out* ($7.95); Jonathan Latimer's 1935 Bill Crane novel, *Headed for a Hearse* ($7.95), an example of the rarely encountered hardboiled locked-room novel with a new Introduction by Max Allan Collins; and Patrick Quentin's Reno-based 1945 novel about mystery fiction's favorite soap-opera couple, Peter and Iris Duluth, *Puzzle for Wantons* ($7.95).

Joel Levy, current editor of *The Gazette: The Journal of the Wolfe Pack,* who first learned of the Wolfe Pack's existence through a news note in *EQMM,* writes that the organization devoted to Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe/Archie Goodwin saga is celebrating its tenth year. The two sample copies provided (Summer and Fall 1988) include an especially nice piece by Margaret Goodman, "Nero Wolfe and the Performing Arts," and a worthy two-part pastiche in play form, "The Daughter Hunt" (good Wolfean title, though a little too revealing of the plot), by Henry W. Enberg. (The same Enberg complains in the letter column, rightly I think, that the pastiches by Robert Goldsborough, whatever their quality, should *not* be considered part of the official Wolfe *corpus.*) The quarterly *Gazette* is included with a membership, available for $20.00 per calendar year from the Wolfe Pack, P.O. Box 822, Ansonia Station, New York, NY 10023. Editorial address for *The Gazette* is 5413 Marlin Street, Rockville, MD 20853.

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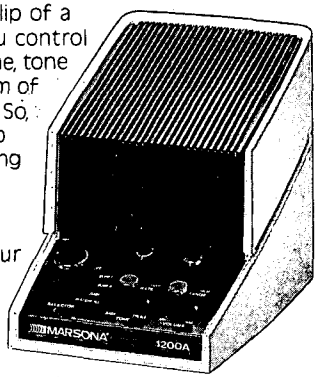

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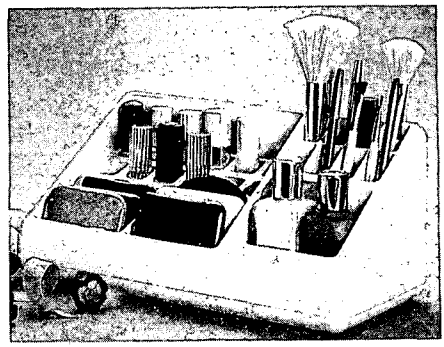

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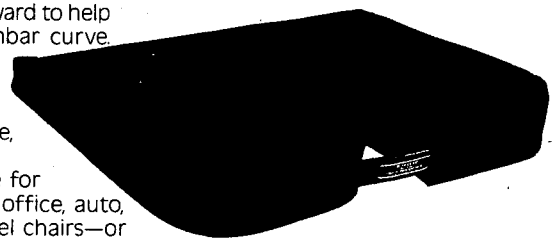

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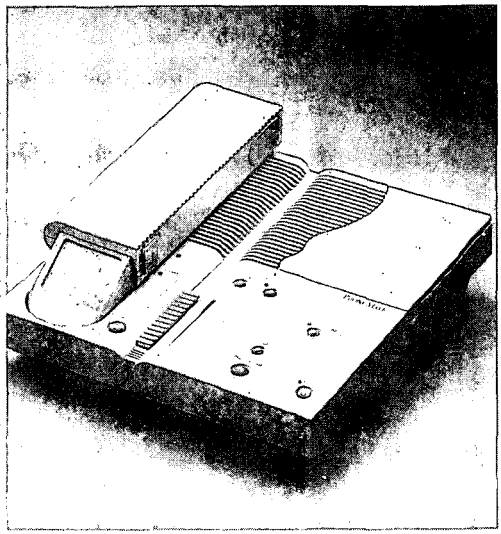

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"Oh, I'm very careful who I pick up," the old lady said. "Your aura told me you were harmless . . ."

THE STORYTELLER

by CAROL CAIL

I was hitching from Dallas to Amarillo in April when the side ditches were full of flowers and dead armadillos.

An empty cattle carrier took me as far as Childress and I'd just begun walking again, just stuck my thumb out without turning around, when this big white Olds with Texas plates pulled over so fast I had to swerve so as not to bark my shins on the rear bumper.

Through the back window, it looked like no one was in the driver's seat, but when I stooped and peered in the passenger-side window, I could see this little old lady scrunched down behind the steering wheel, each bony leg stretched to a pedal. She tipped her head at me and grinned.

Opening the door, I said, "Morning, ma'am. Amarillo? Or anywhere in between?"

"Get in," she said, her voice as miniature as the rest of her. "I can take you this side of Washburn."

"Great."

As I settled my six-foot self into the plush seat, she reached to shut off Willie Nelson in mid-whine.

"No smoking," she said, hand on the gear shift. Her eyes were the same washed-out blue as her doubleknit suit.

"Fine. I don't smoke."

"Good for you." She jammed the lever into drive and gave the car too much gas, and if she checked the rearview mirror, I missed it.

"Thanks for stopping." I dropped my backpack between my knees.

"You really shouldn't do this, you know. Accept rides from strangers. It's very dangerous."

"I was just thinking the same of you. Offering rides. All due respect, I think my size and gender makes me a lot safer than yours does you."

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"Oh, I'm very careful who I pick up." She unclenched one hand from the wheel to wave airily. "Your aura told me you were harmless."

I loved it. Next girl I try to pick up, I'll use some line about her aura.

By now she had the speedometer up to 75, her neck craned to see over the dash, and I had second thoughts about me being safe.

"Actually, I *have* killed quite a few people in my day," she said, a smirky smile in place. "Husbands. Lovers. Strangers. Men, women, children."

Inwardly groaning, I folded my arms, thinking how I'd stick this out to the next town and try my luck again.

"I'm Mavis Richmond," she said, emphasizing syllables like I might find them difficult.

"Tim Jorry," I said without much interest.

She wasn't interested, either, condescension flattening her voice. "You don't recognize my name?"

"Ahh, no, ma'am. Sorry."

"You aren't a mystery reader." She sniffed dismissively.

For a minute I gazed out my window as if I hadn't heard. But what the heck, she was giving me a ride—it wouldn't hurt me to ask. "You write mysteries? Like Angela Whatshername on TV?"

"No, of course not. That's just a show. I do it *really*." She turned a coquettish smile on me that lasted way too long for our speed.

"Go ahead," she said, eyes front again. "Ask me anything about guns or poisons. I'm an expert. Never used the same method twice."

I reached for my seatbelt for the first time in twenty years.

"It's always fun, doing the research," she sighed. "I've always looked young for my age. And innocent. People can't believe I know all that disgusting stuff. That I write all that disgusting—"

"Look out!" I couldn't help front-seat driving as the right-hand tires bumped on and off the pavement.

"You remind me of my first husband." The way she said it didn't sound complimentary. "Writing is wonderful therapy. Instead of harboring ill will toward friends and relatives, you just write them into a novel and kill them off. Melvin, my second husband, passed away long before his heart attack. He was the villain in *Death Takes a Powder*, and he was blown up by twelve parts potassium perchlorate and eight parts sulfur."

I tipped my head back onto the head-rest, pretending drowsiness, but it didn't discourage her.

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"Let's see. Shirley—isn't that an awful name for a man?—he was husband number three and novel number two. Scalped, he was. And it was too good for him. Look at that."

"That" was a smear of fresh red staining the blacktop and leading to a striped shell that Mavis didn't try to avoid.

"Who'd have thought an armadillo would have so much blood in him?" she paraphrased. "Reminds me of Homer and the butcher knife." She narrowed her eyes. "Husband number four. Of course, he really died peacefully in his sleep."

I couldn't help asking, "How many husbands have you had?"

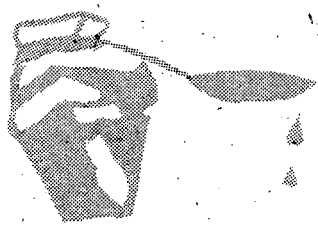
"Only five. Including the current one, Buck. He's going to die in a flaming car crash."

Like a life preserver, the city-limits sign hung at the edge of the highway, and she slowed to fifty m.p.h. out of respect for downtown Clarendon. On the left I caught a glimpse of billboard: SHAW'S FUNERAL HOME—THOUGHTFUL COURTEOUS SERVICE and took it as an omen. There was a traffic light on the horizon I was able to will to stay red till we got there. Not trusting her to stop, I dropped out of the car while it was still rolling, fighting off the seatbelt and yanking the strap of the backpack after me.

"Thanks, ma'am. Got business here. You take care!"

She did come to a stop, raising her wavery voice against the closing door. "Don't you want to hear about my agents? Editors? And my villain of a first husband who sailed out a twelfth-story window before—"

I waved her off, nodding at her still-moving mouth, and leaped my toes back from her suddenly spinning tires. My mind's eye continued to read the little wrinkled lips that compressed the consonants and grimaced on the vowels: "—I began to write?"



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a *NEW* short story by

HARLAN ELLISON

Some years ago, a bookstore in Los Angeles asked Harlan Ellison to do a book-signing and he proposed, in addition to the signing, to sit in the store window with his manual typewriter and write a story a day for a week. And so he did, with the sustenance of his pipe and some Perrier and an occasional slice of pizza. Five days = five stories, though since one of the stories, "From A to Z, in the Chocolate Alphabet" consisted of 26 mini-stories involving each letter of the alphabet he actually wrote 30 stories in those five days.

Harlan went on to do similar store-window writing in Boston, London, and elsewhere. In Paris, a well known disc jockey challenged him to write a story about a female werewolf. The challenge was met with Harlan's story titled "Footsteps"—and after this his publicly written stories were written to include some snippet from an unimpeachable outside source that would prove the work was being done on the spot, had not been pre-plotted, came from no secret cache of ideas. But wait, the plot thickens..

In 1981 Harlan was scheduled to write in the window of B. Dalton's on Fifth Avenue as part of the promotion for Shatterday. *The event was going to be covered by* The Today Show. *But Tom Brokaw was skeptical that Harlan was receiving his ideas in advance, so a uniformed page from NBC delivered the beginning of a story proposed by Brokaw in a sealed envelope. ("A man walking along the rocky coast of Maine finds a pair of broken sunglasses.") The next morning Harlan read his completed story on* The Today Show.

Since then, he has repeated the feat in a number of cities—Chapel Hill, Washington, D.C., etc.—in each case being fed the beginning of the story by a celebrity in the area. In New Orleans earlier this year, Chris Owens, who runs a club in the French Quarter, wrote: "Doing her act one night, Chris Owens looked into the audience and saw a face that gave her a start."

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"Jane Doe #112" is the story Harlan Ellison wrote from Chris Owens' idea and we are proud to publish it as our first story by this two-time Edgar winner in EQMM, at last . . .

JANE DOE #112

by HARLAN ELLISON

Shadows of lives unlived, as milky as opal glass, moved through the French Quarter that night. And one begged leave, and separated from the group to see an old friend.

Bourbon Street was only minimally less chaotic than usual. It was two days till the Spring Break deluge of horny fraternity boys and young women seemingly unable to keep their t-shirts on.

The queue outside Chris Owens's club moved swiftly for the last show. Inside, the entertainer was just starting the third chorus of "Rescue Me" when she looked out into the audience and saw the pale shadow of a face she hadn't seen in twenty years.

For a moment she faltered, but no one noticed. She had been a star on Bourbon Street for twenty years; they wouldn't know that the face staring up palely at her was that of a woman who had been dead for two decades.

Doris Burton sat in the smoky center of a cheering mob half-smashed on Hurricanes; and she stared up at Chris Owens with eyes as quietly gray and distant as the surface of the moon. The last time Chris had seen those eyes, they had been looking out of a newspaper article about the car crash over in Haskell County, when Doris had been killed.

Her parents wouldn't let her go over to the funeral. It was a piece of Texas distance, from Jones County over to Haskell. She had never forgotten Doris, and she had always felt guilty that she'd never gotten to say goodbye.

Now she felt the past worming its way into her present. It couldn't possibly be. She danced to the edge of the stage and looked directly at her. It *was* Doris. As she had been twenty years ago.

The woman in the audience was almost transparent in the bleed

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of light from the baby spots and pinlights washing Chris as she worked. Trying to keep up with the beat, Chris could swear she could see the table full of Kiwanis behind Doris. It threw her off . . . but no one would notice.

Doris moved her lips. *Hello, Chris.*

Then she smiled. That same gentle smile of an awkward young woman that had first bound them together as friends.

Chris felt her heart squeeze, and tears threatened to run her makeup. She fought back the sorrow, and smiled at her dead friend. Then Doris rose, made a tiny goodbye movement with her left hand, and left the club.

Chris Owens did not disappoint her audience that night. She never disappointed them. But she was only working at half the energy. Even so, they would never know.

That night, the Orleans Parish Morgue logged in its one hundred and twelfth unknown female subject. The toe was tagged JANE DOE #112 and was laid on the cold tile floor in the hallway. As usual, the refrigerators were full.

Ben Laborde took his foot off the accelerator as he barreled north on the I-10 past St. Charles Parish, and kicked the goddammed air conditioner one last time. It was dead. The mechanism on the '78 Corollas had been lemons when they were fresh off the showroom floor, and twelve years of inept service had not bettered the condition. Now it had given out totally; and Ben could feel the sweat beginning to form a *tsunami* at his hairline. He cranked down the window and was rewarded with a blast of mugginess off the elevated expressway that made him blink and painfully exhale hot breath. Off to his left the Bonnet Carré Spillway—actually seventeen miles of fetid swamp with a name far too high above its station—stretched behind him as an appropriate farewell to New Orleans, to Louisiana, to twenty-two years of an existence he was now in the process of chucking. The blue Toyota gathered speed again as he punched the accelerator, and he thought, *So long, N'wallins; I give you back to the 'gators.*

Somewhere north lay Chicago, and a fresh start.

When he thought back across the years, when he paused to contemplate how fast and how complexly he had lived, he sometimes thought he had been through half a dozen different existences. Half a dozen different lives, as memorable and filled with events as might

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have been endured by a basketball team with one extra guy waiting on the bench.

Now he was chucking it all. Again. For the half-dozenth time in his forty-one years.

Ben Laborde had run off when he was ten, had worked the crops across the bread basket of America, had schooled himself, had run with gangs of itinerant farm laborers, had gone into the Army at nineteen, had become an MP, had mustered out and been accepted to the FBI, had packed that in after four years and become a harness bull in the St. Bernard Parish Sheriff's Department, had been promoted to Detective, and had had his tin pulled two years ago for throwing a pimp through the show window of an antique shop on Rue Toulouse. The pimp had been on the muscle with someone in the Department, and that was that for Detective Benjamin Paul Laborde.

He had become a repairman for ATMs, but two years fixing the bankteller machines had driven him most of the way into total craziness. And then, there was that group of pale gray people that kept following him . . .

He looked in the rearview. The expressway was nearly empty behind him. If he was being tracked, they had to be very good; and very far behind him. But the thought had impinged, and he cranked up the speed.

There had been six of them for the last year. Six men and women, as pale as the juice at the bottom of a bucket of steamed clams. But when he had seen them out of the corner of his eye the night before last, moving through the crowd on Bourbon Street, there had only been five.

He couldn't understand why he was so frightened of them.

He had thought more than once, more than a hundred times in the past year, that he should simply step into a doorway, wait for them to catch up, then brace them. But every time he started to do just that . . . the fear grabbed him.

So he had decided to chuck it all. Again. And go.

He wasn't at all certain if not having the Police Positive on his hip made any difference.

The nagging thought kept chewing on him: would a bullet stop them?

He ran, but the Corolla didn't have anything more to give. Still, it wasn't fast enough.

*

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Chicago was dark. Perhaps a brownout. The city lay around him as ugly and desperate as he felt. The trip north had been uneventful, but nonetheless dismaying. Stopping only briefly for food and gas, he had driven straight through. Now he had to find a place to live, a new job of some menial sort till he could get his hooks set, and then—perhaps—he could decide what he wanted to be when he grew up.

As best he could discern, he hadn't been followed. (Yet when he had pulled in at a bar in Bloomington, Indiana, and had been sitting there nursing the Cutty and water, he had seen, in the backbar mirror, the street outside. And for a moment, five sickly white faces peering in at him.

(But when he had swiveled for a direct look, only the empty street lay beyond the window. He had paid up and left quickly.)

Laborde had never spent much time in Chicago. He barely knew the city. A few nights around Rush Street, some drinking with buddies in an apartment in a debutante's condo facing out on the Shore Drive, dinner one night in Old Town. But he had the sense that staying in the center of the city was not smart. He didn't know why, but he felt the push to keep going; and he did. Out the other side and into Evanston.

It was quieter here. Northwestern University, old homes lining Dempster Street, the headquarters of The Women's Christian Temperance Union. Maybe he'd take night courses. Get a job in a printing plant. Sell cars. Plenty of action and danger in those choices.

He drove through to Skokie and found a rooming house. It had been years since he'd stayed in a rooming house. Motels, that was the story now. Had been for forty years. He tried to remember where he'd last lived, in which town, in which life, that had provided rooming houses. He couldn't recall. Any more than he could recall when he'd owned a Studebaker Commander, the car that Raymond Loewy had designed. Or the last time he had heard *The Green Hornet* on the radio.

He was putting his underwear in the bureau drawer as these thoughts wafted through his mind. Studebaker? *The Green Hornet?* That was over when he'd been a kid. He was forty-one, not sixty. How the hell did he remember that stuff?

He heard footsteps in the hall. They weren't the halting steps of the woman who owned the hostel. She had been happy to get a boarder. But not even a need to accommodate her new tenant could

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have eliminated the arthritic pace she had set as she climbed the stairs ahead of him.

He stood with his hands on the drawer, listening.

The footsteps neared, then stopped outside his door. There was no lock on the door. It was a rooming house, not a motel. No chain, no double-latch, no security bolt. It was an old wooden door, and all the person on the other side had to do was turn the knob and enter.

He barely heard the tapping.

It was the rapping at a portal of something composed of mist and soft winds.

Laborde felt a sharp pain as he realized he had been clenching his teeth. His jaw muscles were rigid. His face hurt. Whatever he wanted to do, it was not to go over and open that door to the visitor.

He watched, without breathing, as the knob slowly turned and the door opened, a sliver of light at a time.

The door opened of its own weight after a moment, and Laborde saw a woman standing in the dimly lit hallway. She looked as if she were made of isinglass. He could see through her, see the hallway through her dim, pale shape. She stared at him with eyes the color of an infirmary nurse's uniform.

Isinglass? How could he remember something like that? They had used isinglass before they'd started putting real glass in car windows.

The woman said, "Jessie passed through in New Orleans. She was the oldest of us. She was the one wanted to find you the most."

His mouth was dry. His hands, still on the dresser drawer, were trembling.

"I don't know any Jessie," he said. The voice seemed to belong to someone else, someone far away on a mountainside, speaking into the wind.

"You knew her."

"No, I never, I've *never* known anyone named Jessie."

"You knew her better than anyone. Better than her mother or her father or any of us who traveled with her. You knew the best part of her. But she never got to tell you that."

He managed to close the drawer on his underwear. He found it *very* important, somehow, just to be able to close the drawer.

"I think you'd better let the landlady know you're here," he said, feeling ridiculous. How she had gotten in, he didn't know. Perhaps the old woman had let her in. Perhaps she had asked for him by name. How could she know his name?

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She didn't answer. He had the awful desire to go to the door and *touch* her. It was continuing strange, the way the light shone through her. Not as if there were kliegs set off in the distance, with radiance projected toward her, but rather as if she were generating light from within. But what he saw as he looked at her, in that plain, shapeless dress, her hair hanging limp and milky around her shoulders, was a human being made of tracing paper, the image of the drawing behind shadowing through. He took a step toward her, hoping she would move.

She stood her ground, unblinking.

"Why have you been following me, all of you . . . there are six of you, aren't there?"

"No," she said, softly, "now there are only five. Jessie passed through." She paused, seemed to gather strength to speak, and added, "Very soon now, we'll *all* pass through. And then you'll be alone."

He felt an instant spike of anger. "I've *always* been alone!"

She shook her head. "You stole from us, but you've never been without us."

He touched her. He reached out and laid his fingertips on her cheek. She was cool to the touch, like a china bowl. But she was real, substantial. He had been thinking ghost, but that was ridiculous; he'd *known* it was ridiculous all along. From the first time he had seen them following him in New Orleans. Passersby had bumped into them, had acknowledged their existence, had moved aside for them. They weren't ghosts, whatever they were. And whatever it was, he was terrified of them . . . even though he knew they would not harm him. And, yes, a bullet would have done them.

"I'm leaving. Get out of my way."

"Aren't you curious?"

"Not enough to let you keep making me crazy. I'm going out of here, and you'd better not try to stop me."

She looked at him sadly; as a child looks at the last day of summer; as the sun goes down; as the street lights come on before bedtime; one beat before it all ends and the fun days retreat into memory. He thought that, in just that way, as she looked at him. It was the ending of a cycle, but he had no idea how that could be, or what cycle was done.

He moved a step closer to her. She stood in the doorway and did not move. "Get out of my way."

"I haven't the strength to stop you. You know that."

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He pushed her, and she went back. He kept his hand on her sternum, pressing her back into the hall. She offered no resistance. It was like touching cool eggshell.

"This time you leave even your clothes behind?" she asked.

"This time I shake you clowns," he said, going down the hall, descending the stairs, opening the curtained front door, stepping out into the Illinois night, and seeing his car parked across the street. Surrounded by the other four.

As fragile as whispers, leaning against the car. Waiting for him.

Oh, Christ, he thought, *this isn't happening.*

"What the hell do you *want* off me?" he screamed. They said nothing, just watched. Three men and another woman. He could see the dark outline of his car through them.

He turned right and began running. He wasn't afraid, he was just frightened. It wasn't terror, it was only fear.

Abandon the underwear in the drawer. Lose the past life. Jettison the car. Get out of this existence. Forget the deposit on the room. Run away. Just . . . run away.

When he reached the end of the block, he saw the lights of a minimall. He rushed toward the light. Dark things have no shadows in sodium-vapor lights.

Behind him, the milky figure of the fifth one emerged from the rooming house and joined her traveling companions.

They caught up with him only three times in the next year. The first time in Cleveland. There were four of them. Three months later, he stepped off a Greyhound Scenicruiser at the Port Authority Terminal in Manhattan, and they were coming up the escalator to meet the bus. Two of them, a man and the woman who had confronted him in the rooming house in Skokie.

And finally, he came full circle. He went home.

Not to Chicago, not to New Orleans, not as far back as he could remember, but as far back as he had come. Seven miles south of Cedar Falls, Iowa—on the thin road out of Waterloo—back to Hudson. And it hadn't changed. Flat cornfield land, late in September after the oppressive heat had passed, into the time of jackets and zipping up.

Where his house had stood, now there was a weed-overgrown basement into which the upper floors had fallen as the fire had burned itself out. One wall remained, the saltbox slats gray and weathered.

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He sat down on what had been the stone steps leading up to the front porch, and he laid down the cheap plastic shoulder bag that now contained all he owned in the world. And it was there that the last two of those who had dogged him came to have their talk.

He saw them coming down the dirt road between the fields of freshly harvested corn, the stalks creaking in the breeze, and he gave it up. Packed it in. No more getting in the flow, chasing the wind. No more. He sat and watched them coming up the road, tiny puffs of dust at each step. The day was on the wane, and he could see clouds through them, the horizon line, birds reaching for more sky.

They came up and stood staring at him, and he said, "Sit down, take a load off."

The man seemed to be a hundred years old. He smiled at Ben and said, "Thanks. It's been a hard trip." He slumped onto the stone step below. He wiped his forehead, but he wasn't perspiring.

The woman stood in front of him, and her expression was neither kind nor hard. It was simply the face of someone who had been traveling a long time, and was relieved to have reached her destination.

"Who are you?"

The woman looked at the old man and said, "We were never a high school girl named Doris Burton, who was supposed to've died in a car accident in West Texas, but didn't. We were never an asthmatic named Milford Sterbank, who worked for fifty years as a reweaver. And we never got to be Henry Cheatham, who drove a cab in Pittsburgh."

He watched them, looking from the man to the woman and back. "And which ones are you?"

The woman looked away for a moment. Laborde saw the setting sun through her chest. She said, "I would have been Barbara Lamartini. You passed through St. Louis in 1943."

"I was born in '49."

The old man shook his head. "Much earlier. If you hadn't fought with the 2nd Division at Belleau Wood, I would have been Howard Strausser. We shared a trench for five minutes, June 1st, 1918."

"This is crazy."

"No," the woman said wearily, "this is just the end of it."

"The end of what?"

"The end of the last of us whose lives you've been using. The last soft gray man or woman left on a doorstep by your passing."

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Laborde shook his head. It was gibberish. He knew he was at final moments with them, but what it all meant he could not fathom.

"For godsakes," he pleaded, "hasn't this gone on long enough? Haven't you sent me running long enough? What the hell have I ever done to you—any of you? I don't even know you!"

The old man, Howard Strausser, smiled sadly and said, "You never meant to be a thief. It isn't your fault, any more than it's our fault for finally coming after you, to get our lives back. But you did, you stole, and you left us behind. We've been husks. I'm the oldest left. Barbara is somewhere in the middle. You've been doing it for several hundred years, best we've been able to tell. When we found one another, there was a man who said he'd been panning gold at Sutter's Mill when you came by. I don't know as I believe him; his name was Chickie Moldanado, and he was something of a liar. It was the only memorable thing about him."

The woman added, "There's nothing much memorable about any of us."

"That's the key, do you see?" Howard Strausser said.

"No, I *don't* see," Laborde said.

"We were never *any*thing. None of us."

He let his hands move helplessly in the air in front of them. "I don't know what any of this means. I just know I'm tired of . . . not of running . . . tired of, just, I don't know, tired of being *me*."

"You've never been you." Howard Strausser smiled kindly.

"Perhaps you can be you now," Barbara Lamartini said.

Laborde put his hands over his face. "Can't you just tell it simply? Please, for godsakes, just *simply*."

The woman nodded to the old man, who looked to be a hundred years old, and he said, "There are just some people who live life more fully than others. Take, oh, I don't know, take Scott Fitzgerald or Hemingway or Winston Churchill or Amelia Earhart. Everybody's heard their names, but how many people have read much Hemingway or Fitzgerald, or even Churchill's—" He stopped. The woman was giving him that look. He grinned sheepishly.

"There are just some people who *live* their lives at a fuller pace. And it's as if they've lived two or three lifetimes in the same time it takes others to get through just one mild, meager, colorless life, one sad and sorry—"

He stopped again.

"Barbara, you'd better do it. I've waited too long. I'm just running off at the mouth like an old fart."

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She put a hand on his thin shoulder to comfort him, and said, "You were one of the passionate ones. You lived at a hotter level. And every now and then, every once in a while, you just leached off someone's life who wasn't up to the living of it. You're a magpie. You came by, whenever it was, 1492, 1756, 1889, 1943 . . . we don't know how far back you go . . . but you passed by, and someone wearing a life so loosely, so unused, that it just came off; and you wore it away, and added it on, and you just kept going, which way it didn't matter, without looking back, not even knowing.

"And, finally, the last of us followed the thread that was never broken, the umbilicus of each of us, and we came and found you, to try and get back what was left."

"Because it's clear," said Howard Strausser, "that you're tired of it. And don't know how to get out of it. But—"

They sighed almost as one, and Barbara Lamartini said, "There isn't enough of either of us left to take back. We'll be gone, passed through very soon."

"Then you're on your own," Howard Strausser said.

"You'll be living what portion has been allotted to you," the woman said, and Ben could see through the holes where her milky eyes had been.

And they sat there into the deepening twilight, in Hudson, Iowa; and they talked; and there was nothing he could do for them; and finally the woman said, "We don't blame you. It was our own damned fault. We just weren't up to the doing of it, the living of our own lives." What was left of her shrugged, and Laborde asked her to tell him all she could of the others they had known, so he could try to remember them and fit to their memories the parts of his own life that he had taken.

And by midnight, he was sitting there alone.

And he fell asleep, arms wrapped around himself, in the chilly September night, knowing that when he arose the next day, the first day of a fresh life, he would retrace his steps in many ways; and that one of the things he would do would be to return to New Orleans.

To go to the Parish Coroner, and to have exhumed the body of Jane Doe #112; to have it dug out of the black loam of Potter's Field near City Park and to carry it back to West Texas; to bury the child who had never been allowed to be Doris Burton where she would have lived her life. Pale as opal glass, she had passed through and whispered away, on the last night of the poor thing that had been

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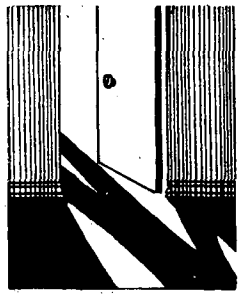
her existence; seeking out the only friend she had been allowed to have, on a noisy street in the French Quarter.

The least he could do was to be her last friend, to carry her home by way of cheap restitution.



DETECTIVERSE

THIEF'S BRIEF GRIEF

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

Tom Katz, the burglar, felt all agog
When confronted by a patrolman's dog.
Away he sped, scattering loot,
Cop and canine in hot pursuit.
Tom, beset by fear intense,
Began to climb a chain-link fence.
A leap, a snarl, a rip, and that's
When the policeman viewed the end of Katz.

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a Horace Rumpole story by

JOHN MORTIMER

John Mortimer's sequel to his bestselling Paradise Postponed *was published earlier this year by Viking. Titled* Titmuss Regained, *it was described by* Publishers Weekly *as hilarious—"Mortimer at his very best: moving, funny, literate, and profound."*

And so, in aid of the coming holidays, is "Rumpole and the Chambers Party" . . .

RUMPOLE AND THE CHAMBERS PARTY

by JOHN MORTIMER

Christmas comes but once a year. Once a year I receive a gift of socks from She Who Must Be Obeyed; each year I add to her cellar of bottles of lavender water, which she now seems to use mainly for the purpose of "laying down" in the bedroom cupboard (I suspect she has only just started on the 1980 vintage).

Tinseled cards and sprigs of holly appear at the entrance to the cells under the Old Bailey and a constantly repeated tape of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" adds little zest to my two eggs, bacon, and sausage on a fried slice in the Taste-Ee-Bite, Fleet Street; and once a year the Great Debate takes place at our December meeting. Should we invite solicitors to our Chambers party?

"No doubt at the season of our Savior's birth we should offer hospitality to all sorts and conditions of men," "Soapy" Sam Ballard, Q.C., our devout Head of Chambers, opened the proceedings in his usual manner, that of a somewhat backward bishop addressing Synod on the wisdom of offering the rites of baptism to non-practicing, gay Anglican converts of riper years.

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"All conditions of men and *women*." Phillida Erskine-Brown, Q.C., nee Trant, the Portia of our Chambers, was looking particularly fetching in a well fitting black jacket and an only slightly flippant version of a male collar and tie. As she looked doe-eyed at him, Ballard, who hides a ridiculously susceptible heart beneath his monkish exterior, conceded her point. "The question before us is, does all sorts and conditions of men, and women, too, of course, include members of the junior branch of the legal profession?"

"I'm against it!" Claude Erskine-Brown had remained an aging junior whilst his wife Phillida fluttered into silk, and he was never in favor of radical change. "The party is very much a family thing for the chaps in Chambers, and the clerk's room, of course. If we ask solicitors, it looks very much as though we're touting for briefs."

"I'm very much in favor of touting for briefs." Up spake the somewhat grey barrister, Hoskins. "Speaking as a man with four daughters to educate. For heaven's sake, let's ask as many solicitors as we know, which, in my case, I'm afraid, is not many."

"Do you have a view, Rumpole?" Ballard felt bound to ask me, just as a formality.

"Well, yes, nothing wrong with a bit of touting, I agree with Hoskins. But I'm in favor of asking the people who really provide us with work."

"You mean solicitors?"

"I mean the criminals of England. Fine conservative fellows who should appeal to you, Ballard. Greatly in favor of free enterprise and against the closed shop. I propose we invite a few of the better-class crooks who have no previous engagements as guests of Her Majesty, and show our gratitude."

A somewhat glazed look came over the assembly at this suggestion and then Mrs. Erskine-Brown broke the silence with: "Claude's really being awfully stuffy and old-fashioned about this. I propose we invite a smattering of solicitors, from the better-class firms."

Our Portia's proposal was carried *nem con*, such was the disarming nature of her sudden smile on everyone, including her husband, who may have had some reason to fear it. Rumpole's suggestion, to nobody's surprise, received no support whatsoever.

Our clerk, Henry, invariably arranged the Chambers party for the night on which his wife put on the Nativity play in the Bexley Heath Comprehensive at which she was a teacher. This gave him more scope for kissing Dianne, our plucky but somewhat hit-and-

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miss typist, beneath the mistletoe which swung from the dim, religious light in the entrance hall of number three Equity Court.

Paper streamers dangled from the bookcase full of All England Law Reports in Ballard's room and were hooked up to his views of the major English cathedrals. Barristers' wives were invited, and Mrs. Hilda Rumpole, known to me only as She Who Must Be Obeyed, was downing sherry and telling Soapy Sam all about the golden days when her daddy, C. H. Wystan, ran Chambers. There were also six or seven solicitors among those present.

One, however, seemed superior to all the rest, a solicitor of the class we seldom see around Equity Court. He had come in with one hand outstretched to Ballard, saying, "Daintry Naismith, happy Christmas. Awfully kind of you fellows to invite one of the junior branch." Now he stood propped up against the mantelpiece, warming his undoubtedly Savile Row trousers at Ballard's gas fire and receiving the homage of barristers in urgent need of briefs.

He appeared to be in his well preserved fifties, with grey wings of hair above his ears and a clean-shaven, pink, and still single chin poised above what I took to be an old Etonian tie. Whatever he might have on offer, it wouldn't, I was sure, be a charge of nicking a frozen chicken from Safeways. Even his murders, I thought, as he sized us up from over the top of his gold-rimmed half glasses, would take place among the landed gentry.

He accepted a measure of Pommeroy's very ordinary white plonk from Portia and drank it bravely, as though he hadn't been used to sipping Chassagne-Montrachet all his adult life.

"Mrs. Erskine-Brown," he purred at her, "I'm looking for a hard-hitting silk to brief in the Family Division. I suppose you're tremendously booked up."

"The pressure of my work," Phillida said modestly, "is enormous."

"I've got the Geoffrey Twyford divorce coming. Pretty hairy bit of in-fighting over the estate and the custody of young Lord Shiplake. I thought you'd be just right for it."

"Is that the Duke of Twyford?" Claude Erskine-Brown looked suitably awestruck. In spite of his other affectations, Erskine-Brown's snobbery is completely genuine.

"Well, if you have a word with Henry, my clerk"—Mrs. Erskine-Brown gave the solicitor a look of cool availability—"he might find a few spare dates."

"Well, that is good of you. And you, Mr. Erskine-Brown, mainly civil work now, I suppose?"

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"Oh, yes. Mainly civil." Erskine-Brown lied cheerfully; he's not above taking on the odd indecent assault when tort gets a little thin on the ground. "I do find crime so sordid."

"Oh, I agree. Look here. I'm stumped for a man to take on our insurance business, but I suppose you'd be far too busy."

"Oh, no. I've got plenty of time." Erskine-Brown lacked his wife's laid-back approach to solicitors. "That is to say, I'm sure I could make time. One gets used to extremely long hours, you know." I thought that the longest hours Erskine-Brown put in were when he sat, in grim earnest, through the *Ring* at Covent Garden, being a man who submits himself to Wagner rather as others enjoy walking from Land's End to John O'Groats.

And then I saw Naismith staring at me and waited for him to announce that the Marquess of Something or Other had stabbed his butler in the library and could I possibly make myself available for the trial. Instead he muttered, "Frightfully good party," and wandered off in the general direction of Soapy Sam Ballard.

"What's the matter with you, Rumpole?" She Who Must Be Obeyed was at my elbow and not sounding best pleased. "Why didn't you push yourself forward?" Erskine-Brown had also moved off by this time to join the throng.

"I don't care for divorce," I told her. "It's too bloodthirsty for me. Now if he'd offered me a nice gentle murder—"

"Go after him, Rumpole," she urged me, "and make yourself known. I'll go and ask Phillida what her plans are for the Harrods sale."

Perhaps it was the mention of the sale which spurred me toward that undoubted source of income, Mr. Daintry Naismith. I found him talking to Ballard in a way which showed, in my view, a gross overestimation of that old darling's forensic powers. "Of course the client would have to understand that the golden tongue of Samuel Ballard, Q.C., can't be hired on the cheap," Naismith was saying. I thought that to refer to our Head of Chambers, whose voice in Court could best be compared to a rusty saw, as golden-tongued was a bit of an exaggeration.

"I'll have to think it over." Ballard was flattered but cautious. "One does have certain principles about"—he gulped, rather in the manner of a fish struggling with its conscience—"encouraging the publication of explicitly sexual material."

"Think it over, Mr. Ballard. I'll be in touch with your clerk." And then, as Naismith saw me approach, he said, "Perhaps I'll have a

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word with him now." So this legal Santa Claus moved away in the general direction of Henry and once more Rumpole was left with nothing in his stocking.

"By the way," I asked Ballard, "did *you* invite that extremely smooth solicitor?"

"No, I think Henry did." Our Head of Chambers spoke as a man whose thoughts are on knottier problems. "Charming chap, though, isn't he?"

Later in the course of the party I found myself next to Henry. "Good work inviting Mr. Daintry Naismith," I said to our clerk. "He seems set on providing briefs for everyone except me."

"I don't really know the gentleman," Henry admitted. "I think he must be a friend of Mr. Ballard's. Of course, we hope to see a lot of him in the future."

Much later, in search of a small cigar, I remembered the box, still in its special Christmas reindeer-patterned wrapping, that I had left in my brief tray. I opened the door of the clerk's room and found the lights off and Henry's desk palely lit by the old gas lamp outside in Equity Court.

There was a dark-suited figure standing beside the desk who seemed to be trying the locked drawers rather in the casual way that suspicious-looking youths test car handles. I switched on the light and found myself staring at our star solicitor guest. And as I looked at him, the years rolled away and I was in Court defending a bent house agent. Beside him in the dock had been an equally curved solicitor's clerk who had joined my client as a guest of Her Majesty.

"Derek Newton," I said, "Inner London Sessions. Raising mortgages on deserted houses that you didn't own. Two years."

"I knew you'd recognize me, Mr. Rumpole. Sooner or later."

"What the hell do you think you are doing?"

"I'm afraid—well, barristers' chambers are about the only place where you can find a bit of petty cash lying about at Christmas." The man seemed resolved to have no secrets from Rumpole.

"You admit it?"

"Things aren't too easy when you're knocking sixty, and the business world's full of wide boys up to all the tricks. You can't get far on one good suit and the Old Etonian tie nowadays. You always defend, don't you, Rumpole? That's what I've heard. Well, I can only appeal to you for leniency."

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"But coming to our party," I said, staggered by this most confident of tricksters, "promising briefs to all the learned friends—"

"I always wanted to be admitted as a solicitor." He smiled a little wistfully. "I usually walk through the Temple at Christmastime. Sometimes I drop in to the parties. And I always make a point of offering work. It's a pleasure to see so many grateful faces. This is, after all, Mr. Rumpole, the season of giving."

What could I do? All he had got out of us, after all, was a couple of glasses of Pommeroy's Fleet Street white; that and the five-pound note he "borrowed" from me for his cab fare home. I went back to the party and explained to Ballard that Mr. Daintry Naismith had made a phone call and had to leave on urgent business.

"He's offered me a highly remunerative brief, Rumpole, defending a publisher of dubious books. It's against my principles, but even the greatest sinner has a right to have his case put before the Court."

"And put by your golden tongue, old darling," I flattered him. "If you take my advice, you'll go for it."

It was, after all, the season of goodwill, and I couldn't find it in my heart to spoil Soapy Sam Ballard's Christmas.

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Sammy worked weekends at a Chicago bank. Twelve noon till twelve midnight Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, shuffling reports off the printers and boxing them for mailing to the various branches. If he hadn't stumbled across a senior VP's personal password while trying to retrieve a report he'd spilled a diet drink on, he'd still be down the mines. Cleaner than digging coal but the same old shaft.

One of our dreams come true we hope you share—a fine new story from a fine new writer fast on the heels of the first . . .

ALMOST HEAVEN

by FLIP JARRETT

A rabbit came out of the brush on the side of the West Virginia road. Sammy was going fast and by the time the headlights caught the blurred shape it was too late to swerve. There was a bump and he was a hundred yards past before his mind registered what had happened.

Great, he thought, now I'm a murderer twice over.

Wasn't exactly murder the first time, he reasoned. On the tube they keep telling me to take a bite out of crime. I should be a hero—I sure bit off a hunk.

Sammy worked weekends at a Chicago bank. Twelve noon till twelve midnight Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, shuffling reports off the printers and boxing them for mailing to the various branches. If he hadn't stumbled across a senior VP's personal password while trying to retrieve a report he'd spilled a diet drink on, he'd still be down in the mines. Cleaner than digging coal but the same old shaft.

The rest was easy. Move a decimal point two places and a hundred became ten thousand. Change an address and a check showed up in his box. Make up a company letterhead, a few rich-sounding names

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for the board of directors, and loans were there for the asking. Redirect an incoming payment and the bank paid the bank for its own investment. A few hours at night with his home computer and a modem was all it took.

And it worked. Right up till the moment he tapped the Mathiez account. How the heck was I supposed to know who Rich Mathiez was? he asked himself. Shouldn't the FBI or somebody publish a list of those guys?

The old fellow they sent had been stupid. He must have figured a computer nerd was an easy job. Nerds aren't supposed to have guns in the nightstands next to their beds.

So where you going, Sammy? his mind asked.

He didn't answer.

You're going home, aren't you, Sammy? his mind persisted.

Home. Jesus. Going to the middle of nowhere with a dead guy in his trunk. God, he hated West Virginia. Chicago had seemed like the high-rent area of Eden when he first went there out of WVU. He did the tourist bit till his neck ached from looking up at the buildings taller than the hills around the ramshackle shacks of the piss-ant holler where he had spent his ramshackle, piss-ant childhood.

He swung around the sharp curves up the side of a hill with the ease of a nostalgic familiarity. His new Beamer was nothing like the pickup he used to sneak out of the holler in when his daddy was passed out drunk. That was almost every night there to the end when the old guy took a wrong step coming down the hill from his still and killed the few brain cells the shine had left him.

Mom scheduled the funeral for sunrise. All the folks thought it was a real nice idea. Up on the side of a hill above the Little Coal River with the sun rising. They probably didn't guess she'd done it so she could be back in time for the afternoon soap operas.

Almost home. He thought about the state's unofficial motto, Almost Heaven. He figured there was heaven and there was hell. Anything that was "almost heaven" had to be the latter.

So why are you going there? His mind again.

Because, dummy, there's an abandoned mine where Daddy used to store the corn and sugar for his still. In about twenty feet is a boarded-over shaft going down deeper than the Devil's well. What could he do with a body in Chicago? He was sure Capone had had places a lot better hid than the hotel vault they opened. But he didn't

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have much time before the meat in the trunk passed its expiration date.

A quick chat with Mom and George and, when they were tucked in, a moonlight walk like he used to take with Daddy. Only instead of sugar on one shoulder and corn on the other he'd have two thirty-gallon can liners held together with duct tape for an improvised body bag. And on the way down, he wouldn't have that.

Then it would be off to Baja or Brazil. They might find him, but he doubted it. They were businessmen first and foremost. When the investment in tracking him equaled the relatively small amount he'd taken, they'd stop looking.

He was coming down the steep hill fast and started pumping the brakes. He searched the right side of the road for a row of battered mailboxes marking the mouth of the holler. He almost missed them in the dark but slammed on the brakes and swung in with a crashing jar to the underside of the car.

"Crap," he muttered, "if I tear off my muffler on this wash-basin road, I'll sue the governor. No sense suing anybody else. He's the only one with any money in this godforsaken state."

The car bumped and lurched its way deeper into the black, huddled hills. For fifty yards, he followed the creek bed with water lapping up to the doors. These hillbillies never heard of a brushless car wash, he complained to himself, passing houses belonging to uncles or cousins whose names he could barely remember. Then he came to his mom's place.

The house was a grey, two-story shape crouching on the side of the hill. A flight of ten backless wooden steps led to the front porch on the first story. The back door leading into the kitchen was ground level on the second story. West Virginia architecture was part Frank Lloyd Wright and part Al Capp with a touch of Rube Goldberg thrown in for good measure.

The lights were on in the living room. He could see a shadow peeking out from behind lace curtains. One of the uncles or cousins who lived closer to the hard road would have called when he went by, telling his mom with nosy helpfulness company was coming. He climbed the rough stone walk to the swept dirt front yard, then the stairs to the high porch. She was in the doorway hugging a tattered terrycloth robe around her against the chill of the night air.

"Hey, son," she said with unalloyed suspicion, "what brings you home in the middle of the night?"

Sammy bent and kissed a cold-creamed cheek.

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"Gotta be in Atlanta for a convention and had a hankering to swing by and see you." Had a hankering? he thought. What the heck is a hankering?

"So you won't be staying?" his mom asked. Sammy remembered a friend of his who mocked Southern hospitality, saying it was always "Real glad to see y'all, when are you leaving?"

" 'Fraid not, Mom. Gotta be back on the road before sunup."

"Well, thank God for small favors. C'mon in, George is putting on a pot of coffee."

Sammy entered the parlor. On the far wall was an open gas heater with flame shooting up behind a stone grill, reflecting the heat onto the worn black-and-white-linoleum floor. A couch with a handmade quilt thrown over the back to cover the threadbare spots and a recliner were separated by a round wooden table with a lamp growing out of it like a solitary tree in a forest clearing. On the table was a West Virginia-shaped ashtray filled with butts, a pack of generic cigarettes, and an ancient lighter. George's droppings, as easy to read as deer spoor on frozen ground.

The room was dominated by a twenty-five-inch color console TV. A wire exited through a hole in the baseboard and went up the side of the hill to an antenna. He'd given the TV to Mom as a wedding present. He spent the better part of a day getting the wire strung, then yelling back and forth to George as he turned the antenna till they got the best reception. A labor of love, maybe, but more labor than love was involved.

"That you, Sammy?" George called from the kitchen up the narrow flight of stairs.

"Yeah, George, you know what they say about bad pennies turning up."

George came down carrying three cups of coffee, a chipped porcelain pot, cream, sugar, and artificial sweetener crowded onto an aluminum school-cafeteria tray.

"You ain't no bad penny, boy," he winked. "Heck, you must be worth at least a dime now."

"Two bits if you throw in my car," Sammy went along amiably.

George laughed so hard he barely got the tray set on the end table without dumping the lot on the linoleum. They sat and fooled with the fixings for their coffee. George was in the recliner, stretched back with moccasin house-slippers in the air. Sammy and his mom

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were on the couch. She slapped his hand when he reached for the sweetener.

"Cut that out, son," she reprimanded, "you're skinny as a rail. Need some meat on those bones if you're ever going to make a grandma out of me." She piled two spoons of sugar into his cup and filled it to the brim with cream.

"Jesus, Mom, I spend a hundred a month on a health club and you're going to have me fat as a pig."

"Ain't fitting for a man your age to look like a beanpole."

Sammy's mom was an expert on what was and wasn't fitting. She was just shy of her forty-seventh birthday. Her hair stretched back from a widow's peak and her face seemed pulled taut by the force of daily combing. She had no-nonsense hazel eyes and if she owned an ounce of fat she kept it in a box in the closet. She put the sweetener she'd denied her son in her own coffee without comment.

George was slender, too, but looked more like a kid had built a human form from an Erector set and fleshed out the metal parts. He had a harsh cough that sounded like a dog barking "cancer" but he lit a cigarette anyway.

Sammy met George for the first time when he came down to give the bride away at their wedding. There had been something about him that didn't click. George said he was from Wheeling up in the northern panhandle, but the accent hadn't been right. A West Virginia accent isn't Southern, at least not like the few movies they'd made set in the state made it sound. Some said it was the closest to the Old English accent of the original settlers left in this country—they said Shakespeare's plays would have been done with a West Virginia accent when first performed. Sammy shuddered at the thought.

He had seen George twice since then—once for his mom's birthday and another time at Christmas. The last time he couldn't tell George's accent from anybody else's in the state.

They sat, drank their coffee, and talked. After midnight, Sammy stood and said his goodnights. He apologized for having to leave early and insisted his mom didn't need to fix him breakfast.

George stopped him on his way to his old room off the kitchen. "Listen, Sammy, can I get a favor?"

"Sure, George—what can I do you for?"

"My truck's in the shop over in Charleston. I was going to take the bus tomorrow and pick her up, but you'll be heading that way. How's about a lift? Give us a chance to get better acquainted."

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Sammy thought about turning him down but there didn't seem to be a way to say no without arousing suspicion.

"Sure, George, but I gotta be out of here by five."

"I'm an old goat. Most often I'm up puttering around by then, anyway."

"Okay, George—see you in the morning."

"Thanks, Sammy."

His mom thanked him also and leaned forward for a goodnight peck. Sammy went upstairs rubbing cold cream off his lips.

He lay on top of the covers listening through the groaning of the old house till he was certain his mom and George were asleep. Then he slipped out the back door. He went around the side of the house away from their bedroom window and down to his car.

Light splashed over the slick black trash bags when he opened the trunk. He leaned forward, worming his hand under the body, and got the first whiff of decay.

"Forget something, son?"

Sammy whipped up and around, banging his head on the trunk lid. George came walking out of the darkness, his cigarette glow preceding him like Rudolph's red nose guiding Santa's sleigh.

"Jesus, George, you scared the crap out of me!" Sammy lowered the trunk lid and stepped between the old man and the car. George moved forward, shoving him aside, and opened the trunk. He whistled softly between his teeth, blowing ash from the cigarette onto the bagged body.

"Looks like you're in a peck of trouble, boy."

"You were waiting out here. How'd you know?"

"I could tell you I stepped out to shake the dew off my lily but there don't seem much point in lying. You got the look of a man with the hounds nipping at his heels, son. Truth is, I know that look from way back. So let's cut to the bone and you tell old George all about it."

Sammy told him, while the old man leaned against the car, and smoked three cigarettes while he listened.

When Sammy finished, George asked, "So what's the deal now? Why come here with your troubles? I never figured you for a momma's boy."

"There's an abandoned mine up the side of the hill with a shaft that goes down deep."

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George nodded. He stood mulling this over, his face cavernous and unreadable in the light from the trunk.

"Looks like you could use some help getting this old boy up there," he said, making up his mind.

"I don't want to get you and Mom involved any more than I have to," Sammy told him.

"Hell's bells, son—in for a penny, in for a pound. Besides, you're family." He dug a fluorescent lantern from the trunk and handed it to Sammy.

Sammy carried the head and shoulders and left the feet for George. It took them nearly an hour to get the body up the hillside. Twice they fell and the black bag rolled downhill until it snagged in the brush. The second time, a briar ripped open the head end of the bag.

"God, I hate this frigging state!" George cursed.

Sammy grinned, panting from the exertion. "Almost heaven," he said. He told George how he figured almost heaven had to be hell.

"You got that right, boy!" George agreed heartily as he bent to pick up the bag the second time. He stared at the face, then back at Sammy. Sammy turned away guiltily. The old guy had probably never seen a body up close and personal.

When they made it to the entrance of the mine, they stretched the bag out near the boarded-over shaft. Sammy hung the fluorescent lantern that had been dangling from his belt on a low beam. He sat on a leftover sack of corn, his hands hanging limply between his knees, and waited for his ragged breathing to slow. George stood across the narrow tunnel, leaning against the cool water-slicked rock of the mine. He lit a cigarette and smoked, watching the cold cloud of smoke in the dim light rise to the ceiling and spread, unable to find a way out.

"I can call your mom tomorrow and tell her the truck isn't ready and I'll be stuck in town for the day," he said in a suddenly unaccented voice. "I can drive your car to Huntington and sell it to one of those lots that don't ask questions. With luck, I can catch the bus back to Charleston before the garage closes and be home tomorrow night."

"I can't let you—" Sammy started, but George ignored the interruption.

"If they're following you, the trail will go cold in Huntington. No reason they should come snooping around here."

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"What are you talking about, George?" Sammy shifted nervously on his dry corn seat.

"You shouldn'ta come here, Sammy. I'm sorry." George took a flat black automatic from under his shirt. He pulled a stubby silencer from his pants pocket and began screwing it on the barrel of the gun.

"George?" Sammy felt like the time he'd gone swimming in the Little Coal River too early in the spring. The frigid mountain water had frozen his mind as much as his body—he'd forgotten how to swim and almost drowned.

"The fellow in the bag is Frank Libretti. He was once the best—second best, if you count me. Frank and me were friends. In the same line of work, if you follow me. Seven years ago, I got old and had the good sense to know it. I bought a bus ticket to Miami and got off here. Lots of folks in these hills hiding one way or the other. From the past or from the future, makes no never mind. Nobody asks questions. So you see, I can't very well let them come looking for you and find me."

"Who are you?"

"Nobody you'd want to know."

Sammy moved. He tried for the lantern, hoping to throw it at George and get away in the sudden dark.

The gun wasn't nearly as loud as the bullets ripping open his chest. He spun, arms outstretched, and dropped across the planks covering the shaft. The rotted, dusty wood gave way and he fell into the darkness.

George rolled the body bag in the hole after him. He coughed harshly and lit another cigarette.

Looking down the shaft, "Almost heaven," he muttered. "God, I hate this state."

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

Wicklow wasn't just physically cruel—he had a nice line in psychological torments, too. The most perilous position at Manorfield School was that of a new boy Wicklow apparently befriended. He could combine the psychological and the physical, as when he would overlook a minor offense with the chilling phrase, "I'll save it up." The end of this saving was always a beating of horrible ferocity.

Another mesmerizing fiction from Robert Barnard's boundless and diverse imagination . . .

THE STUFF OF NIGHTMARES

by ROBERT BARNARD

Strangely enough, I'd thought of Wicklow only the week before. I'd been reading a review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of a life of Hemingway and reacted to the assertion: "All bullies are something else underneath, of course." I'd shaken my head. Wicklow wasn't, I said to myself, Wicklow was just bully through and through.

And now here he was on the other side of a smoky Glasgow bar—the body even heavier, the face jowlier, the hair flecked with grey, but still unmistakably the Wicklow of my schooldays thirty years on. I shivered uncontrollably and buried my head in the *Literary Review*.

Perhaps it wasn't so strange that I'd thought of Wicklow so recently: I think he comes to my mind whenever instances of legalized cruelty come up—and heaven knows that's often enough these days.

It must have been 1960 when I saw him last, but that was two or three years after he had left Manorfield School. He used periodically to revisit the scene of his triumphs. The period of his greatest dom-

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inance was the mid-Fifties, notably the years 1956–58, when he was a prefect. Then he was at his peak. He had always, I'm sure, tyrannized over boys smaller than himself, but as a prefect he had real power. One of my waking nightmares is a memory picture taken through my legs as I was bent over for punishment. It is of Wicklow running forward, cane raised.

The memory is terrible, not just for the pain that came after—the sharp, annihilating pain, repeated over and over—but especially for the expression of unbounded relish on his face. After the first stroke, he always laughed—the laugh succeeding his victim's first cry of pain, telling him, as if he didn't know already, that any pleas for mercy would be so much wasted breath.

Wicklow wasn't just physically cruel—he had a nice line in psychological torments, too. The most perilous position at Manorfield was that of a new boy Wicklow apparently befriended. He could combine the psychological and the physical, as when he would overlook a minor offense with the chilling phrase, "I'll save it up." The end of this saving was always a beating of horrible ferocity.

But you will say: "But this was the Fifties—things like that didn't happen then." Oh, but they did: they happened in some "good" schools, and they happened in many bad schools. Manorfield was a very bad school. I told my father what was going on when I went home for the holidays, but he just shrugged and said it was part of the process of growing up, that I needed to be toughened up, that he wouldn't want people to say that any son of his was a ninny. I think his attitude was that *he'd* been through it in his time so he didn't see why I shouldn't go through it in my turn. I think, even, that he rather enjoyed the thought. When, many years later, he begged me not to have him put in an old people's home I found it quite easy to harden my heart.

"Cardwell! If it isn't young Cardwell! Still got your nose buried in a book, I see!"

His face was reflected, horribly distorted, in the wet barroom table, a twisted version of my nightmare picture. My heart sinking, I looked up. There he was, standing over me as so often before: those rugby player's shoulders, the large hands now clutching a pint glass, the beer belly, and, above all, the chilling smile. I nodded, casual, very cold, trying to disguise the fact that I still felt fear of him.

"Hello, Wicklow," I said.

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"You'd seen me, hadn't you? Recognized me. And you didn't come over to say hello."

"Is there any reason why I should?"

"It would have been friendly. What are you having?"

I shook my head grimly and put my hand over my glass.

"Wise man. I'm going to have to try to get rid of this." He patted his belly and went over to the bar. I sat there praying that was the end of the encounter, but knowing it wasn't. He brought his fresh pint over to my table and sat down. "That wasn't friendly, you know, Cardwell," he said, "seeing me over there on my own and shrinking into your—whatever it is." He waved his hand contemptuously at my periodical. "But then you always were a cagey little sod. What's the word? Introverted—that's it."

I tried to assert myself. "Look, Wicklow, what's this about? I think I've made it pretty clear you're not welcome."

"You haven't been chummy, but I can't for the life of me see why not."

"If you're so thick that I have to spell it out, then I'll spell it out: you're not welcome because you're a sadist who made my schooldays a misery."

"Good heavens, that was thirty years ago! What a time to nurse a grievance. Blame the system, blame the school."

"The system allowed it, you took advantage of it. You were the most appalling bully."

Wicklow smiled. "I dispensed discipline."

"You did a whole lot more than that. And you enjoyed it."

"Of course I enjoyed it! It would have been a bloody silly waste of effort if I hadn't, wouldn't it?"

The frankness of the admission took me by surprise. He was beginning to fascinate more than repel me.

"You used to come back after you'd left—" I began.

"Oh, boy, yes! I used to play with the First Fifteen when they just had friendlies. And then in the gym afterwards—I was in peak condition then. Though I say it myself, I was an artist. I had an agreement with the head boys who came after me. They used to save the hard cases for me to operate on. I used to look forward to those Saturdays. Hated it when they came to an end."

Oh, the lovely English nostalgia for our schooldays!

"Yes, I remember my last two years were free of you," I said.

"An old aunt, last of her line, running a small manufacturing business, adopted me as her heir. I changed my name, took over the

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running of the business, moved up to Scotland." He sighed. "It was an offer I couldn't refuse, but there was some heart-searching, I can tell you."

"I can imagine you running a business," I said.

He laughed, that Wicklow laugh I remembered so well.

"You think I'm the sort of industrialist who lays off his workers just before Christmas, don't you?"

"Yes, Wicklow, I do."

"Not at all. Nothing so crude." His face twisted into the Wicklow smile. "But I do have a list of birthdays and wedding anniversaries."

"That figures," I said. "Are you married yourself?"

"I was, briefly. She couldn't stand the—pace."

"You really are an appalling man, aren't you?"

"I am what I am what I am. Blame the school."

"You didn't have to use the system in the way you did."

"Good Lord, can you imagine anyone with my tastes *not*? And who's to say it wasn't the school, giving the older boys those powers, that nourished the tastes in me. You're not being logical, old man."

"I'm not feeling logical."

"Though to be fair, a sadist will always find an outlet, one way or another. Look at the language politicians use when the mortgage rate goes up—'hurt,' 'bite,' 'strong medicine.' I'm not very different to thousands of others. You just had a few bad times, that's all."

"You changed my whole character."

He shrugged. "You look to me to be a perfectly normal man. Of a certain type."

"You really have no shame, have you?"

"None whatsoever. I've had a good life on the whole. Shame should be felt when you haven't done what you could have done, even though you wanted to. I've usually been able to do what I've wanted to do. The only thing I've never done is murder anyone."

"You could murder my wife," I said.

We both laughed. A shared barroom joke that I despised myself for having initiated. But as I drained my glass, my hand shook at having given myself away to him. He put out his hand and took my glass. "You'll have that refill now, won't you? Dry white? It would be."

By the time he returned from the bar I had got my breath back. The words had come out involuntarily because I was so preoccupied

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with what to do about Eileen. But I'd treated it as a joke, and he'd treated it as a joke.

"So what about you?" he said, settling his bulk down behind the table. "What do you do for a living?"

"Oh, nothing very exciting. I work for Nicolls, the publishers."

"Might have known it would be something bookish."

"Actually I'm on the production side. Oh, they give me a manuscript to advise on now and again, something in my field, or something on one of my hobbies. But mostly the job is practical and financial. I come up here once a fortnight because our printing works is here."

"Ah. But you live in London?"

"Yes. Or Bromley, anyway. I commute, along with thousands of others."

"Nice house?"

"Nice enough. Bromley isn't exactly Olde Worlde. Still, it's big—bigger than we could afford if we were buying it now—and it's got plenty of ground. When you've been to boarding school you value privacy."

"That's right. Children? I should think you'd like children."

"No. My wife is—delicate."

"Ah—shame. But you like your job, do you? It's satisfying, I should think."

"Yes. Yes, it is that. I'd like to be on the editorial side—that's where my interest lies. But I'm too useful on the production things—I'm up in the technology, very good at costing and so on, so I suppose that's where I'm stuck."

"And the—special interest: where does she work?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Come off it, Jeff—we're both men of the world." He laughed hugely, and I hated the thought of being a man of the world alongside him. "You're either having something on the side or there's a prospect in view."

Inevitably I produced my man-of-the-world credentials.

"Well, there is someone in Publicity. A lot younger than me, but—well, she seems—"

"Interested. Good. Good for you! And hence your little matrimonial problem." We both laughed. It was all a great laugh. "But that shouldn't be a problem these days, should it? I got rid of mine. Well, strictly speaking, she flew the nest. Why shouldn't you do the same, or persuade your wife to?"

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"I told you, she's delicate." My smile was bitter. "You've no idea how delicate a delicate wife can be! She spends half her life in bed. The fact is, her sanity's on a knife's edge."

He raised his eyebrows and laughed heartily again. "Guilt. That's your problem, isn't it, Jeff? You can't do what you want to because you'd be consumed with guilt afterwards."

"Yes, that is my problem."

"As I say, I've never felt that way. Perhaps I am the man to help you with your—matrimonial problem."

He said it with a huge smile, and I laughed back at him. "What do you propose? Some kind of *Strangers on a Train* deal where I do one for you in exchange?"

"Good Lord, no. If I wanted a murder done, I wouldn't choose a wimp like you to do it."

I was still laughing, but inside I cringed. What was it in me that wanted to live up to his horrible standards? "No," he went on, "what I was proposing was a personal service to you. You obviously feel some kind of bitterness—God knows why, after all these years—and I'm proposing to make it up to you."

"And achieve a personal ambition."

"And achieve a personal ambition. So make sure when you're up here again on—when will that be, the seventeenth?"

"That's right. The seventeenth and eighteenth."

"That you take someone out to dinner in the evening, make a late night of it, be at the works early in the morning, and go home again in the usual way. When would that be?"

"I catch a mid-day train, get home a bit after six."

"There you are—problem solved."

This was all done with great grins, lots of laughter—as if we were still schoolboys, and schoolboys who liked each other. But inside my heart was beating fast.

"Joke over," I said. "I love my wife."

"Absolutely, old boy. All husbands do."

"There is no matrimonial problem."

"Quite. And you're getting younger every day, and the little thing in Publicity will wait forever. I get the picture. Christ, I need a pee." He stood up, looming over me in the old way, looking down at me and smiling. "Of course, I'd make it look like a robbery."

I sat there as he lumbered off to the lavatories, shouldering smaller drinkers aside. Half of me wanted to escape from him, from his threatening presence and from the hideous memories he evoked.

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The other half told me I had to stay, to make sure it *had* been a joke, to get the message through to him that if he had been serious he'd better think again because *of course* I didn't want him to murder my wife.

I sat, and sat, and sat. Wicklow did not return. His cruelty was as beautifully calculated as ever. After half an hour I went back to my hotel. It was an effort to behave normally as I collected my key at the desk. When I got to my room, I ran into the bathroom and stood over the basin, retching, heaving, crying. As I lay on my bed afterwards, staring at the ceiling, I remembered times at school when I had done exactly the same thing after sessions with Wicklow. Same old Wicklow, same old Cardwell. And a situation that nothing at Manorfield School had prepared me for.

With daylight things didn't seem quite so bad. On the long train trip home, I reasoned that of course he hadn't been serious—it had just been one of Wicklow's games, those horrible playings with people that had been almost worse than the beatings. The whole thing had been the drama of an evening, something to enliven a chance encounter. True, the other half of me said that one way or another I'd given him all the information he needed and something very deep down said I'd given him the information because I wanted him to have it, wanted him to do what he was engaging himself to do, but on the whole I convinced myself by the time I returned home that it was all a nightmarish joke, nothing more. I could face Eileen with my usual cheerful patience.

Two days later I received his postcard. "Definitely interested in that business arrangement. Cheers, Chris."

I had forgotten his Christian name. Nobody thought of him as anything but Wicklow at school. A Christian name would have humanized him. The postcard was a view of Durham, and it was posted in Berwick. It was addressed to my home—he must have got my address from the telephone directory, the only Cardwell in Bromley. I thought of getting on to Directory Enquiries and asking for a C. Wicklow in Berwick, but then I remembered he'd changed his name.

"Any letters, Jeff?"

Wicklow needn't have bothered to be enigmatic on the card. Eileen was never down to breakfast. Often she never came down at all. It was a red-letter day if she made it to the shops to get something for

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our dinner. Mostly we lived out of tins, and off prepared meals I bought at weekends and kept in the freezer.

"Only bills, darling."

Two days later, this time at work, I got another card: "Made all arrangements for our date? I have. Cheers, Chris."

It was a picture of Dundee, posted in Bradford.

"I think I'd better take Peters and his wife out to dinner next time I go to Glasgow," I said to Taylor in Accounts.

"Why?" He flicked through his cards and peered at my entertainments account. "It's only nine months since you dined him last."

"It seems so unspontaneous to take him regularly every year in April. I think he's a bit discontented. He's a good man and we don't want to lose him."

"Oh, very well. But make it fifteen months before you take him again."

Nicolls, you will have gathered, are not an open-handed firm. I rang Peters and made the arrangements. If he was surprised he was too polite to show it.

I hoped, through all this, that I was behaving normally. Susan, sadly, was the one it was most difficult to be with. She is a sweet girl, and very receptive to other people's moods, especially mine. The day before I was due to go up to Glasgow I received a last postcard: "It's as good as done. Best wishes. Chris."

It was a picture of Piccadilly Circus, and posted in SW1. I burned it, as I had burned the other two.

The things I do at the printing works in Glasgow are regular and standard, and I hope I did them this time in a regular and standard way. The dinner with Peters was more difficult. I tried not to be too hectic in my joviality, spun the meal out longer than usual by insisting we had brandies with our coffee. I think Peters was surprised when I suggested a nightcap in the bar of my hotel. It was by then half past ten and the last flight from Glasgow to London had just gone. Still, you couldn't be too careful. The Peterses agreed to "just a quick one," and when they left I named a wrong room number at Reception to make sure I was remembered. Not that it was necessary: I was a regular there—known and liked. I, who was hoping that at that very time Wicklow was murdering my wife.

Was I hoping? Or merely planning in case he did? I cannot now disentangle my conflicting feelings . . .

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The next day I went early down to breakfast, early off to the works, where Peters informed me that he and his wife had thoroughly enjoyed their evening. By eleven, the various chores were done and I had coffee with several of the management in the canteen. Then I took a taxi to the station.

On the train I relaxed my guard a little—relaxed my face muscles, allowed myself to frown, got myself a gin and tonic from the buffet. I pretended to read my *Guardian*, took out my papers, and did one or two calculations of costs. But there was only one thing on my mind.

I crossed London, took the electric train to Bromley, and walked home. It was by now well after six, and dark. There was no outside light on at my house, but then there often was not. I let myself in, turned on the hall and outside lights, and shouted up the stairs:

"I'm home, darling."

There was no reply. There usually was a reply, unless we'd had a tiff. I left my case in the hall, went into the living room, where all was normal, then I went up the stairs. Heavily, reluctantly. There were no lights on and everything was deathly still. Was I imagining it, or was there a smell—a terrible, insidious smell? I turned on the landing light and then went to our bedroom door and turned on the light there.

The scene was terrible. She had known what was coming to her, but then I realized with a sickened shock that with Wicklow that would obviously have been part of the plan. The bed was terribly disturbed, and Eileen was lying across the foot of it in her nightdress, her throat cut, and her blood everywhere. I screamed in genuine horror, ran halfway down the stairs, was pulled up by a fit of retching from which nothing came up, then I ran down the remainder of the stairs and picked up the phone in the hall. Clumsily, feverishly, I dialled 999.

"Police! Quickly! My wife has been murdered! Please come! 25 Ravenscroft Avenue. Please! Please come!"

A patrol car was outside the house in five minutes, and in another minute or two a car with two detectives. I met them at the door, still ashen-faced and sobbing.

They ran upstairs and I dragged myself up and stood on the landing, unable to look through the door but bent against the wall, my forehead against the cool of it, sobbing, my stomach still heaving with disgust and fear.

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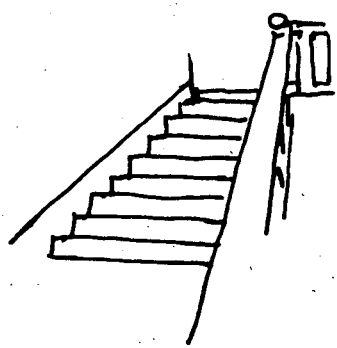
"You've just got home, sir?" said the detective sergeant at the bedroom door. The three others came to join him there.

I nodded, swallowing. "Yes. I've had two days in Glasgow, on business. She must have been killed last night while I was away."

"Last night, sir? She's still warm. The blood hasn't dried. I'd say she hasn't been dead half an hour."

"But that's impossible! He said—"

I raised my head and encountered the eyes of four policemen, looking at me with intense suspicion. I do not now know whether I heard, or simply seemed to hear, the familiar laugh of Wicklow from the garden.



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ON OUR COVER

Maureen McGovern grew up in Youngstown, Ohio, where she knew from the third grade on that she wanted to be a professional singer. She never considered college—she just wanted to sing—so after high school she tried to break into the local music scene. During the late Sixties, she and four musicians formed a group and went on the road. Seven years of traveling all over the world produced great results for McGovern: a #1 gold single for the Academy-Award-winning "The Morning After" from *The Poseidan Adventure,* another hit recording of an Oscar-winning song, "We May Never Love Like This Again" from *The Towering Inferno,* Grammy and Golden Globe nominations, gold records in Canada, Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and England. Still, she came off the road in 1976 "flat broke, with only three months' rent left." Moving to California, hard times followed when she temporarily abandoned her singing career to work as a secretary.

Her career picked up again when she recorded another movie theme, "Can You Read My Mind?" from *Superman.* Wanting to branch out around this time, she turned to musical theater and replaced Linda Ronstadt in the Broadway production of *The Pirates of Penzance.* Frank Rich of *The New York Times* proclaimed her "a real find for the musical theater." She went on to appear in *Nine,* opposite Raul Julia, and throughout the country in *South Pacific, Guys and Dolls,* and *I Do, I Do.* Most recently she starred on Broadway in *Threepenny Opera,* opposite Sting.

Expanding her musical horizons, she has sung concerts over the last few years with the Boston Pops, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Washington National Symphony, and others. Her album *Naughty Baby* is an all-Gershwin collection that has prompted many to hail her as "the quintessential interpreter of Gershwin." Her most recent release is a Christmas album from CBS records.

She makes her home in Manhattan, in an elegant, antique-filled apartment on the West Side, where the cover photograph was taken.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

The pump inside Jethro Maxwell's frail chest was not as efficient as it used to be. Please, no stroke, Eloise said to herself. The only thing worse than the present situation would be an impaired Jethro dragging his paralyzed side from room to room, talking like a ventriloquist. And with faithful Mike dogging his footsteps. Let him go quickly, she prayed. An accident with the car would be ideal.

William Bankier has been praised for the manner in which he deals with music in his short mystery fiction. He is no slouch when it comes to animals, either. Remember "The Dog Who Hated Jazz"? If you missed that one, we offer you this reprieve . . .

A ONE-MAN DOG

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Eloise crouched on the window-seat, watching her husband and his big black dog. Jethro Maxwell was stretched out on a lawn chair under a colorful umbrella. Born seventy-four years ago, he had never grasped the concept of casual clothes. Half in shade, half in sunlight, his lanky body looked tortured in a three-piece tweed suit, wing collar, bowtie, and high-topped oxblood boots.

She wanted him to die. Right now would be as good a time as any. Sunstroke would serve. It was no secret—he knew how she felt. But whenever she voiced her frustration, he seemed not to hear. She was reduced to the frantic imperative, "Get out of my life!"

It was the boredom of the status quo that made her want him gone. He was on his last legs, anyway, one foot in the grave. Long since retired from the real-estate business, Maxwell clung to passing-grade health, not well enough to be anything but a pest. The

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situation was untidy. A fiend for neatness, Eloise wanted to replace the worn-out relationship with pristine solitude.

The dog was worse than its master. Jethro insisted on letting it wander everywhere inside the house. Eloise would have relegated the brute to the garage. Its glossy coat shed constantly. She found a hair now on the paisley upholstery beside her. She plucked it with lacquered nails, opened the casement window, and dropped it outside. Jethro inclined his head to the sound, but his eyes remained closed.

He said to the dog, "Think it's time for the mail, Mike?" The dog heaved itself up off the flagstones and padded out of sight around the corner of the house.

Was that not infuriating? There had been no obedience training, no "heel," no "sit." The old man simply spoke to the animal as an equal. It seemed to understand and it did his bidding. But nobody else's. Mike was a one-man dog, and Jethro Maxwell was that man.

"You're wasting the dog's time," Eloise said through the open window. She could remember evenings long ago when she and Jethro sat within reach of each other, drinking their sundowners, replaying the day, planning the evening. Now she stalked him from a distance. What had gone wrong? Nothing. Their life together was like a predictable play. The current hostility was merely the last few pages of a repetitive script. "There's no mail on Sunday."

"I'm expecting a letter from Sanford," the old man replied. "A response to something I sent him. He said he'd drive by today and drop it in the box."

"But he wouldn't come up to the house and see a person." Eloise was peeved. The lawyer was not her favorite individual, but his appearance would have been the excuse for a drink.

"Why should he?" Maxwell said. "If he wants *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* he can go to the theater."

The dog reappeared with a letter in its mouth. It was pleased with itself. Maxwell accepted the envelope and dried it on his sleeve. He opened it, read the contents, and tucked everything away inside his jacket pocket.

Now, as Eloise watched, he got to his feet—too quickly as it turned out. He staggered, grasping at the umbrella pole to keep from falling. He sat down and let his head hang between his knees. She felt some pity watching this demonstration of infirmity. The pump inside the frail chest was not as efficient as it used to be. Asking it to deliver

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blood all the way to a brain raised suddenly several feet higher was expecting too much.

Please, no stroke, Eloise said to herself. The only thing worse than the present situation would be an impaired Jethro dragging his paralyzed side from room to room, talking like a ventriloquist. And with faithful Mike dogging his footsteps. Let him go quickly, she prayed. An accident with the car would be ideal.

When he came inside, she said, "I'm having a drink." An ice cube discharged from chrome-plated tongs bounced inside a crystal glass. "Would a taste of bourbon lift you up?" She knew alcohol was against doctor's orders.

"Not for me. I nearly keeled over outside."

"Remember what I told you. When you're gone, the dog goes, too."

"I haven't forgotten your threat."

"So you'd better take care of yourself."

"I take care of everything." Maxwell sat in his wingback chair. The dog lay down and put its chin on the polished toe-cap of the left boot. "I'll rest for a minute. Then I'll take Mike into the kitchen and feed him."

"I prepare meals in that kitchen. They don't allow pets in restaurants—why should I put up with one?"

"We'll be gone before you go in there."

"Shedding hairs and dropping fleas and spilling liver." They were both tired of the ancient argument, but Eloise could feel it erupting again. The words were like the hornets that came swarming out of their grey paper nest under the eaves on that summer afternoon when she was nine years old. There was no keeping them in. "I wish you'd get rid of that dog."

"Not again."

"We don't need a dog."

"You don't, but I do. He's my friend."

"I'm your wife."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

They were barking at each other. Despite her sense of shame, Eloise felt some satisfaction. It was as if the worn-out argument had shreds of comfort attached to it. Harsh words were better than no words at all. "You used to have time for me," she said.

"I have very little time," he intoned, "for anything." He got up and the dog followed him out of the room. "You know how it is, don't you, Mike. What's life like when you're old and tired?"

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"Rough," said the dog.

Three years ago, when Mike first came aboard, Eloise had tried to win him over. But the animal wouldn't come when she called, he wouldn't pursue the ball she tossed across the lawn. It was a rubber ball pocked with tooth-marks from many retrievals in response to Jethro's command. "Damn it, I'm *not* trying to take you over," Eloise snapped at him that day. "*Be* his dog! But give me a moment of your time." The soulful face might have been carved out of ebony. The idea of shared allegiance was beyond Mike's understanding.

Last summer, K. J. Sanford came over for one of his rare visits. In the old days, when the Maxwell real-estate business was thriving and Jethro was in his litigious prime, the lawyer had plenty to do. Now the war was over so there wasn't much to bring the old men together. On the occasion of that visit, Sanford spotted the dog crossing the lawn. "Hey, boy! Come on, doggie!"

"He won't pay any attention," Eloise said. Jethro was inside the house recharging the visitor's glass.

"I like dogs. Come on, boy! What's his name?"

"Mike."

"Here, Mike! Come on, Mike!" Sanford struggled out of his chair. He was a Jethro Maxwell clone, bleached and dried and destined to live another twenty years. He whistled and clapped his hands. "Come on, boy! Here, doggiedoggiedoggie!"

Mike continued on inside through the patio doors, deaf head swinging. There was satisfaction for Eloise in that. Minutes later, Maxwell was back with two drinks. As he handed one to the lawyer, he saw his wife's empty glass. "Did you want something?"

"I've had enough."

"Where's Mike?" He raised his voice. "Come on, Mike!"

The dog loped out onto the patio and presented himself to the old man.

Remembering all this, Eloise wandered down the dark corridor into the kitchen. Here, the last light of day was pouring in through leaded panes. Mike was wolfing his meal. Jethro was crouched close by, watching. From the doorway, Eloise asked, "How much longer?"

"Finished in a minute."

"I mean us."

"What about us?"

"This limbo. Our cold war. How much longer does it go on?"

"Not much longer," the old man said. "Trust me." He glanced over

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his shoulder and the malevolent look he cast her way was so inappropriate that Eloise told herself it must have been a trick of the light.

Early mornings were chilly this time of the year. Eloise stood at the top end of the steeply sloping driveway. Bundled in a raincoat, she was smoking a brown cigarette. There was no need for her to be outside, she had told the detective all she knew.

But she didn't want to go inside the house. After all the frustration, it was fulfilling to see Jethro's body lying halfway down the slope with the car fifty feet past him on level ground. He was dead. A neighbor had noticed the body at seven o'clock when he came out to pick up his newspaper. When the doorbell rang and she hurried outside and ran across the lawn to lean over him, she had said, "Who did this?" Nobody could answer that question.

The medical examiner finished his work and was now talking to the detective. They were standing near the car. But Jethro Maxwell was not alone. The black dog sat like a statue beside the corpse. It was hard to tell what Mike was thinking. The animal's head was turned to the horizon. For all Eloise knew, it was considering the dog equivalent of "Who did this?"

Eloise shivered. She needed more clothes on. She went inside and dressed herself in slacks and thick socks and a woolly sweater. She was making coffee when she thought of K. J. Sanford. The lawyer ought to be told. She picked up the telephone. It was still early, but waking up the old coot would be a pleasure.

"K.J.? It's Eloise. I'm fine, but Jethro isn't. Somebody drove over him in our car. Crushed his chest, stopped his heart. Right outside the house in the driveway. The detective thinks I did it. —No, he hasn't said so, but I can tell what he's thinking. Cherchez the wife."

Sanford said he would be right over. "Don't say anything, Eloise," he warned her. "About you and Jethro and your relationship."

"It could be taken down and used against me?"

"Exactly."

She carried a mug of steaming coffee to the detective. He took a sip and said, "Mmm." It was the nicest sound Eloise had heard in weeks. His name was Stokes and he looked like an accountant in his blue pin-stripe suit and rimless glasses. "You must be cold," he said.

"I was before. You don't even have a coat on."

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"I like early mornings. I run at five o'clock. Before the sun comes up."

"That's admirable."

"Best time of the day. Keeps the mind tuned, even more than the body."

"My husband gets up early. To walk the dog." She saw two men approaching with a stretcher. "Used to get up."

Stokes said, "I must ask you some questions."

"I know."

They were taking Jethro's body away. The dog didn't move. Its eyes were turned to the pale sky.

"You don't have to answer them."

"So I've been told."

"Is that his dog?"

"His alone. It would never come for me or anybody else. Only for my husband."

"Time of death is set at around four A.M. Where were you?"

"Asleep in bed." Eloise was high on her husband's demise. The light-headed sensation was making her behave without inhibition. "I have no alibi. I don't mind telling you I wanted him dead, I'm glad it happened."

Their eyes met and held. Stokes seemed to come to a conclusion. His method in new cases was to trust his instinct early on.

A shiny black car, much like the murder weapon, rolled onto the drive. K. J. Sanford climbed out and joined the couple near the house. He refused coffee. He said to the detective, "If you're in charge, I'd better give you this." He handed over a sealed envelope. "Jethro filed this document with me a couple of weeks ago. He seemed to be afraid for his life. He said it was to be given to the police if he died under suspicious circumstances."

It was a note in Jethro Maxwell's handwriting. Stokes read it aloud. "My wife intends to murder me. She has said so more than once. She not only wants me gone, she means to get rid of my dog. If I should be killed, Eloise Maxwell is the guilty party." There was his signature—then: "P.S. See that Mike finds a good home."

With a wry smile, Eloise extended her wrists. "Is this when you snap on the cuffs?"

"Not just yet." Stokes walked down the steeply sloping driveway to where the car was standing. First he peered in through the open window on the driver's side. Carefully, using his handkerchief, he opened the door and studied the steering wheel. Then he knelt down

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and ran his hand over the brake pedal. Standing up, he examined the palm of his hand. Nodding to himself, he walked back up the slope.

"This isn't a case of murder," he said. "This was suicide, carefully planned to cast suspicion on Mrs. Maxwell."

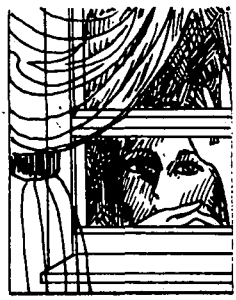
"How do you figure that?" asked Sanford.

"Dog hairs on the brake pedal." He presented his hand. "The gear shift is set in neutral. Here's what must have happened. The deceased brought his dog inside the car and placed the animal with its weight against the brake pedal. He told it to stay there. Then he went and lay down in front of one of the wheels, far enough down the slope to let the car pick up speed. Finally, he called his dog. It jumped out through the open window, the brake was released, the car rolled down the slope, and the old man's chest was crushed."

After a lengthy silence, K. J. Sanford said, "Sounds like Jethro to me."

Eloise let the earth turn until the sun was low and the afternoon cooled off, then she brought her drink onto the patio and sat in one of the recliner chairs. While Jethro was alive she had believed she couldn't be lonelier. Now he was gone and it was as if part of her inner self had been pulled out through her skin. Years ago, she had watched somebody thrust a sharp implement into a melon, twisting it to withdraw a red, wet plug. Her present situation was far worse than solitude. She had not anticipated such pain.

Something touched her hand. She glanced down, blinking to clear the tears. The black dog was beside her chair. He opened his mouth and something bounced on a flagstone. It was his wornout, misshapen, tooth-ravaged rubber ball.



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a ***NEW*** **Inspector Wexford story by**

RUTH RENDELL

"Tell me exactly what happened, would you, Hilary? Jenny's told me, but I'd like you to." Burden was painfully aware of sounding like a policeman. On the other hand, she had wanted *a policeman. "Tell me from the beginning."*

"I thought you were going to say 'in your own words,' Mike."

He inclined his head a little, not smiling.

"Sorry. Being so miserable makes me bitchy," she said. "What is this, therapy?"

It's been a while since we've had an Inspector Wexford story for you. In the meantime, we hope you've caught the expertly done series about him on the A&E Network . . .

AN UNWANTED WOMAN

by ***RUTH RENDELL***

"It's not a matter for the police."

Burden had said it before—to his wife, if not to this woman. The affair of Sophie Grant, bizarre, nearly incomprehensible, was outside the range of his experience. Deeply conservative, convinced of the superiority of past ways to those of the present, he was inclined to blame events on the decadence of the times he lived in. He repeated what he had said and added, "There's nothing we can do."

Jenny's friend, who was not crying yet, who seemed on the verge of crying or even screaming, a desperate woman, said in the voice she could only just control, "Then who am I to turn to? What can I do?"

"I've already suggested the Social Services," said Jenny, "but it's true what Hilary says, all they can do is take her into care, apply for a care order."

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"She's not in need of care," Hilary said with bitterness, with venom. "She doesn't need protecting. It's me, I'm the one who's suffering. I ought to be taken into care and looked after." She had her voice and herself under control again. Her wine glass was empty. She took hold of it and, after a small hesitation, held it up. "I'm sorry, Jenny. I *need* it. It's not as if it was the hard stuff."

Jenny refilled the glass with Frascati. Hilary had got through half the bottle. They were sitting in the living room of the Burdens' house in Glenwood Road, Kingsmarkham. It was just after nine on a winter's evening—Christmas not far off as evinced by the first few cards, greetings from the superpunctual, on the mantelpiece. A wooden engine, gaily painted, a worn rabbit, and a Russian doll, its interlocking pieces separated, lay on the carpet, and these several objects Jenny now began picking up and dropping into a toy chest. Hilary watched her with increasing misery.

"I know I'm a nuisance. I know I'm disturbing you when you'd like a quiet evening on your own. I'm sorry, but you—well, Jenny—you're all I've got. I don't know who else to talk to. Except to Martin and he—sometimes I think he's *glad*. Well, he's not, I shouldn't say that, but when she was there she was so hateful to him, it must be a relief. You see—" she looked away from them "—I'm so *ashamed*. That's why I can't tell other people, because of being ashamed."

Burden thought he would have a drink, if only to make Hilary feel better. He fetched himself a beer from the fridge. When he came back, Jenny had her arm round Hilary and Hilary had tears on her face.

"What is there to be ashamed of?"

"A woman whose child doesn't want to live with her? What sort of a mother can she be? What sort of a home has she got? Of course I'm ashamed. People look at me and they think, what was going on in that house? They must have been abusing her, they must have ill-treated her."

"People don't *know*, Hilary. Hardly anyone actually knows. You're imagining all this."

"I can see it in their eyes."

Buoyed up by his drink, resigned to the ruin of his evening, Burden thought he might as well go the whole hog. Get it first-hand, though he could do nothing. Nothing could come of it but the slight relief to Hilary Stacey of relating it once again.

Jenny said suddenly, "Does her father know?"

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"Her father wouldn't care. It's once in a blue moon he writes to her—she hasn't heard from him for months."

"Tell me exactly what happened, would you, Hilary? Jenny's told me, but I'd like you to." Burden was painfully aware of sounding like a policeman. On the other hand, she had *wanted* a policeman. "Tell me from the beginning."

"I thought you were going to say 'in your own words,' Mike."

He inclined his head a little, not smiling.

"Sorry. Being so miserable makes me bitchy. What is this, therapy?"

"It might be that as well," said Burden. He was foraging in his knowledge of the law, thinking of such vague and insubstantial offenses as enticement and corruption of a minor. "Let me have the facts. I'm not saying we can do anything—I'm sure we can't—but just tell me what happened, will you?"

She looked him in the eye. Her own eyes were a startling turquoise blue, large and prominent. It was easy to see why she never wore makeup, she was colorful enough without it—that white and rosy skin, those eyes, flaxen hair straight and shining. A woman with those attributes should have been good-looking, but Hilary missed beauty by the length of her face that gave her a horsy look. She was very thin, thinner since this trouble started.

"It really began long before I married Martin," she said, "perhaps even when Peter and I were divorced five years ago. I didn't *want* a divorce, you know, I wanted to stay married for life. I know it sounds self-pitying, but it wasn't my fault, it really wasn't, I was hard done-by. Peter's girl friend was pregnant. I still didn't want a divorce, but how long can you keep on fighting? I knew he'd never come back.

"Sophie was nine. She made a big thing about saying she hated Peter. She told people he'd left 'us'—not that he'd left me. She knew about the girl friend, Monica, and she used to say her father preferred Monica to us. Well, she wouldn't see Peter for months, but gradually she came round. It was the baby, I think. He was her half brother and she liked the idea of a brother. She started to enjoy spending weekends with Peter and Monica and the baby. I will say for Monica that she was very nice to her, and of course it wasn't the usual situation where a child is jealous of a new sibling.

"I honestly think none of this would have happened if Peter and Monica were still here. I'm sure it's much more due to their going to America than to me marrying Martin. Peter had this job and no

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doubt it was the only course for him to take. He was always more or less indifferent to Sophie, anyway. Monica was much nicer to her than her father was and I don't think it bothered him that he wouldn't see his daughter for years. He could have afforded to pay her air fare to Washington but he wouldn't.

"It was a blow to her. It was a second blow. Okay, I suppose you'll say my remarrying was the third. But what's a woman to do, Mike? I was on my own with Sophie, I had a full-time job, and the school holidays were a nightmare. So I got a part-time job and even that was too much for me. And then when things were about as grim as they'd ever been, I fell in love with Martin and he fell in love with me. I mean, it was like a dream, it was like something that you daren't dream about because it just won't happen, things as good as that don't happen. But it did. A nice, kind, clever, successful, good-looking man was in love with me and wanted to marry me and liked my daughter and thought she could be his daughter, and everything was wonderful.

"And she thought so, too—Sophie thought so. She was happy, she was excited. I think she saw Martin as a wonderful new friend, hers as much as mine. Of course, we were very careful in front of her, she was thirteen and that's a very difficult age. For ages I never let Martin even kiss me in her presence and then when he did he'd always kiss her, too.

"We got married and she was at the wedding and she loved every minute of it. Next day she started to hate him. She loathed him. She did everything to try and split us up—she told lies to us about the other one, she'd seen Martin out with a woman, she'd heard me call a man 'darling' on the phone, she'd heard me telling Jenny I married him for his money. Yes, *truly*. You wouldn't credit it, would you?

"When she saw she couldn't separate us, she did what she's done, walked out and went to live with Ann Waterton. That's where she is and where she intends to stay, she says.

"I've pleaded with her, I've begged her, I've even tried to bribe her to come back. I've pleaded with Ann Waterton. I've been there, I've even set it all down in writing, in letters to her. To do Ann justice, she hasn't enticed her or anything like that—she's lonely and she likes Sophie's company, but she's told her she ought to come home. Anyway, she says she has. Sophie won't. She's got a key to Ann's house, she comes and goes as she pleases, and she's very good to Ann, she looks after her. She likes cooking, which Ann doesn't, and

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she cooks special meals for them. She takes Ann her breakfast in bed before she goes to school.

"I've asked Ann to change the locks on the door but she won't, she says Sophie would stay out in the street all night, and I think she's right—Sophie would do that. She'd wrap herself in blankets and sit on the garden wall or sleep in Ann's garage."

Burden said, "Have you asked her what it is she wants?"

"Oh, yes." Hilary gave a short, bitter laugh. "I've asked her. 'Get rid of Martin,' she says, 'and then I'll come home.' "

"What's the bugger done to her?" said Chief Inspector Wexford.

It was the following day and he and Burden were on their way to London. Donaldson was driving and Wexford and Burden sat in the back of the car. Their mission was to interview two men suspected of being concerned in a raid on Barclay's Bank in Kingsmarkham High Street a week before. One lived in Hackney, the other was usually to be found around midday at a pub in Hanwell. Burden had been relating the story of Sophie Grant.

"Nothing," he said. "I'm sure of it. Oh, I know you can't tell. It's no good saying, I know the guy, I've had a meal in his house, I know he's not like that. The most unexpected men are like that. But I'd say he just didn't have time. He didn't have the time or the opportunity. He and Hilary Grant, as she was, were newly married, sharing a bedroom—that was partly the trouble. Sophie stayed around for three weeks and then she left."

"But you say she seemed to like the chap before he married her mum?"

"I suppose she just didn't know, she didn't realize. She was nearly fourteen, but she didn't realize her mother would be sharing a bed with Martin Stacey. And I expect there was some kissing and cuddling and touching in her presence—well, there was bound to be."

"She thought it was a marriage for companionship, is that what you're saying? Yes, I can imagine. The mother was very careful, no doubt, *before* she was married—no physical contact when the girl was there, definitely no bed-sharing, no goodnight kisses. And then, after the wedding, a kind of explosion of sensuality, mother and stepfather having no need to curb their ardor. Because it would be okay, wouldn't it, they were *married*, it was respectable, nothing to object to. A shock to the girl, wouldn't you say?"

"According to Hilary, it was pretty much like that." Burden began assembling in his mind the facts and details as Hilary Stacey had

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told them. "Sophie seems to have given him hell. Insulted him, told her mother lies about him, then refused to speak to him at all. That went on for a week, and one evening she just didn't come home from school. Her mother didn't have time to get worried before Sophie phoned her and said she was with Mrs. Waterton and there she intended to stay."

"Why Mrs. Waterton?" Wexford asked.

"That's rather interesting in itself. Sophie is a very bright child, good at her schoolwork, always in the top three. And she does a lot of community service, visiting the elderly and the bereaved, that sort of thing. She does their shopping and sits with them. There's a blind woman she calls on and reads the newspaper to her. As well as this, she does babysitting—she babysits for us—and she used to do a paper round, only her mother stopped that, quite rightly in my view. It's dangerous even in a place like this.

"Ann Waterton's in her sixties. She lost her husband in the spring and apparently it hit her very hard. There were no children. Sophie used to go to her house after school—just to talk, really. They seem to have got on very well."

"A girl of that age," Wexford said, "will often get on a great deal better with an older woman than with her own mother. I take it this Ann Waterton's no slouch—I mean, she's got something to give a lively, intelligent fourteen-year-old?"

"According to Hilary, she's a retired teacher. In his last years, she and her husband were both studying for Open University degrees but she gave that up when he died. At one time she used to write the nature column for the Kingsmarkham *Courier*."

Wexford looked dubious. The car had joined the queue of vehicles lining up for the toll at the Dartford Tunnel. They were in for a long wait. Burden looked at his watch, a fairly useless exercise.

"One evening about a month after George Waterton died, Sophie called round there. It was about nine, but light still. She was on her bicycle. Hilary Stacey and Ann Waterton live about a mile apart, Hilary in Glendale Road—you know, the next street to me—and Mrs. Waterton in Coulson Gardens. Sophie couldn't make Mrs. Waterton hear, but the back door was unlocked and she went in, thinking she would find her fallen asleep over a book or the television.

"She did find her, in an armchair in the living room, and she appeared to be asleep. There was an empty pill bottle on the table beside her and a tumbler which seemed to have contained brandy. Sophie acted with great presence of mind. She phoned for an am-

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bulance and then she phoned her mother. Of course, Hilary hadn't yet married Martin Stacey, though she was planning to marry him, the wedding being fixed for August.

"Hilary got there first. She and Sophie managed to get Ann Waterton onto her feet and were walking or dragging her up and down when the ambulance came. As we know, they were in time and Ann Waterton recovered."

Wexford said unexpectedly, "Was there a suicide note?"

"I don't know. Hilary didn't say. Apparently not. She and Sophie had been very anxious it shouldn't appear as a suicide attempt but as an accidental taking of an overdose."

"Bit indiscreet telling you then, wasn't it?" said Wexford derisively. "Why did she tell you?"

"I don't know, Reg. It was all part of the background, I suppose. She knew I wouldn't broadcast it around."

"You've told *me*. And Donaldson's not deaf."

"That's all right, sir," said Donaldson, no doubt indicating his willingness to be the soul of discretion.

"I imagine everybody knew about it," said Wexford. "Or guessed. And after that she and this Mrs. Waterton became fast friends, is that it? The house in Coulson Gardens was the natural place for the girl to decamp to." He pondered for a moment or two as the car moved sluggishly toward one of the toll booths. "The mother might be able to get a care order made or a supervision order," he said. "She could try to get her made a Ward of Court."

"She doesn't want to do that, and who can blame her? She wants the girl back living with her. Sophie's out of control, it's true—that is, her mother can't control her to the extent of making her come home—but she hasn't done anything wrong, she's broken no law."

"The danger," said Wexford, "with getting a care order for someone who's out of control might be that it contained a requirement for the subject—that is, Sophie Grant—to reside with a named individual. And suppose that named individual was Ann Waterton?"

The car began to head for London up the motorway.

From the tall, rather forbidding curtain wall of stone blocks rose thirteen towers. The arc lamps flooded them with white light and showed up the cloudy, smoky texture of the sky behind, purplish, very dark, starless. In the great wall, which had lost its roof some six centuries before, which was open to this heavy, rain-threatening sky, a performance of Elizabethan music was under way, drawing

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to its close just in time, thought Burden, before the heavens opened. He was there, sitting in the second row, because Jenny was singing in the choir.

This was the first time he had been to Myland Castle, a type of fortification (according to the program) innovative in Europe in the Twelfth Century. It was a huge fortress containing the remains of gateways and garderobes and kitchens and tunnel-vaulted rooms and features called rere-arches. Burden was more interested in the castle than the concert. It was too late in the year, in his opinion, for outdoor performances of anything. The evening was damp and raw rather then really cold but it was cold enough. The audience huddled inside sheepskin and anoraks.

It was a mystery why the organizers had picked on this place. Size alone must account for it, for the acoustics were so bad that the harpsichord was nearly inaudible and the sweet melodious voices were carried up into the sky where no doubt they could be clearly heard some two hundred feet in the air. As a soloist began on the final song, "Though Amaryllis Dance in Green," Burden let his eyes rove along the top of the walls and the catwalk between the towers. From the other side of the curtain wall, where the great buttresses fell steeply away to green slopes and a dry moat, the view across country must be very fine. Perhaps he'd come back in the spring and bring Mark.

The applause was enthusiastic. Relief, they're glad it's all over, thought Burden, the Philistine. That sort of thing was better at home, by the fire, on a compact disc.

Jenny, coming up to him, laying an icy hand on his, said, "You couldn't hear, could you?"

Burden grinned. "We couldn't hear as much as we were meant to." He was astonished and pleased to see it wasn't yet nine. Time had passed slowly. He took his wife's arm and they ran to the car park as the rain began.

The extreme youth of their babysitter, Sophie Grant, had worried him the first time she came. That she would phone her mother in the next street if there was any cause for alarm did a lot to calm his fears. By the time she had sat for them three times, he trusted her as entirely as he would have trusted someone three times her age. She might be fourteen but she looked seventeen. It was absurd, he reflected as he walked into his living room, to think of her in the context of care orders, of being in need of supervision or protection.

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She was sitting on the sofa with her books beside her, writing an essay on unlined paper attached to a clipboard. Her handwriting was strong, clearly legible, slightly forward-sloping. She looked up and said, "I haven't heard a sound from him. I went up three times and he was fast asleep." She smiled. "With his rabbit. He's inseparable from that rabbit."

"D'you want a drink, Sophie?" Jenny remembered she was a child. It was easy to forget. "I mean hot chocolate or a cup of tea or something?"

"No, thanks—I'd better get off."

"What do we owe you?"

"Nine pounds, please, Jenny. Three hours at three pounds an hour. I started at six-thirty, I think." Sophie spoke in a crisp and businesslike way, without a hint of diffidence. She took the note and gave Jenny a pound coin.

Burden fetched her coat. It was a navy-blue duffel and in it she immediately shed a few years. She was a schoolgirl again, tall, rather gawky, pale-skinned and dark-haired, the hair long and straight, pushed behind her ears. The shape of her face and the blue eyes were her mother's, but she was prettier. She packed books and clipboard into a rather battered briefcase.

"I'll walk you home," said Burden. It was only round the corner, but these days you never knew. He had forgotten for the moment where home was for her now.

She said, "Coulson Gardens. It's a long walk."

Should he dispute it? Argue? "I'll drive you," he said.

They were uncomfortable together in the car. Or Burden was uncomfortable. The girl seemed tranquil enough. It was cowardice, he thought, that kept him from speaking. Was he afraid of a fourteen-year-old?

"How long are you going to keep this up, Sophie?" he said.

"Keep what up?" She wasn't going to help him.

"This business of living with Mrs. Waterton, of refusing to go home to your mother."

For a moment he thought she was going to tell him to mind his own business. She didn't. "I haven't refused to go home," she said. "I've said I'll go home when he's not there. When she gets rid of him, I'll go home."

"Come on, he's her husband."

"And I'm her daughter. You're going past it, Mike—it's the house

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with the white gate. She loves him, she doesn't love me. Why should I live with someone who doesn't care for me?"

She jumped out of the car before he could open the door for her. A small slim woman with short grey hair was looking out of a front window, the curtain caught on her shoulder. She smiled, gave a little wave, a flutter of fingers. Burden thought, I can't just leave it, I can't miss this opportunity. "What's Martin Stacey done, Sophie? Why don't you like him? He's a nice enough chap, he's all right."

"He made her deceive me. They pretended things. They both pretended he was going to look after us and earn money for us and like us both—not just her, not just want to be with her. And she pretended I was the most important person in the world to her. It was all false, all lies. I was nothing. He *made* me nothing and she *liked* it." She spoke in a low intense voice that was almost a growl.

There was a pause in which she drew a long breath, then: "Thanks for the lift, Mike. Goodnight." She ran up the path and the door opened for her. The figure of Mrs. Waterton was fleetingly visible.

On the way home, Burden thought, It's as much that woman's doing as the girl's. Why does she give her a room? Why does she feed her? She ought to go away for a bit, shut up the house. She would if she had any sense of responsibility.

He said something of this to his wife.

"Oh, think, Mike, how Ann Waterton must love it. She was all alone, a widow, no children, probably not many friends. People don't want to know widows, or so they say. And then suddenly along comes a ready-made granddaughter, someone who actually *prefers* her over her own mother and her own home. I'm not saying she deliberately encouraged Sophie, but I bet you she doesn't make any positive moves to send her home. It must have brought her a new lease on life. Did she look happy?"

"I suppose she did," said Burden.

"Well, then. And less than six months ago, she was suicidal."

It was a fortnight before he saw Sophie's mother again. Once more she was spending the evening with Jenny, Martin Stacey being away on a protracted business trip abroad.

"He's glad to get away from me, I expect. It's been nothing but trouble ever since we got married. Of course, he's been angelic but how long can that go on? I'm always miserable, I cry every day, I'm

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always in a state, he can't put up with that forever. So I've decided what to do. You tell him, Jenny. Tell him what I'm doing."

Jenny said drily, "It's a case of if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Hilary's idea is that the best thing for her to do is make friends with Ann Waterton."

"I've stopped arguing about it. I've stopped telling her she has to send Sophie home and I've stopped threatening her."

"Threatening her?" said Burden, on the alert.

"I only mean telling her I'd get an injunction to stop her seeing Sophie. I don't suppose I ever would have. But now I've decided to *like* her. The way I see it, I don't have a choice. And if it works—well, oh, it's all in the air as yet, but I thought maybe we could all live together. If Sophie's that crazy about old Ann, the answer might be for us all to be together. Sell our houses and buy a big house for the lot of us."

Burden thought, But surely it's not that Sophie is especially "crazy" about Mrs. Waterton as that she's especially uncrazy about her stepfather. He didn't care to say this aloud. It occurred to him that Hilary Stacey, if not exactly unhinged by all this, was becoming rather strange.

"So what's happening?" said Jenny. "You're inviting her to tea, are you? Taking her out for drives?"

"She can drive herself," Hilary said shortly. "This is deadly serious, Jenny. This is my life, my whole future existence we're talking about. You could say I've lost my only child."

Jenny poured her another glass of wine.

"I reason," said Hilary, "that if my daughter likes someone that much, I could like her, too. After all, we used to be very close, Sophie and I—we used to like the same things, the same people, we had the same taste in clothes, we liked the same food. There's got to be something about old Ann that I can like. And there is, there is. I can see there's a lot more to her than I thought at first. I thought Sophie was flattered—you know, a sort of granny-substitute buttering her up and telling her how pretty and clever and mature she was, all that, but Ann's a very bright woman, she's very well read. It's just a matter of my meeting her more than halfway."

"I wonder what that poor devil of a husband's going to say," was Wexford's comment when Burden retailed all this to him, "having a supererogatory mother-in-law shacking up with him."

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"Hardly shacking up," Burden protested. "And it hasn't come to that yet. Personally, I don't think it ever will."

"Does her mother make her an allowance? Give her pocket money?"

"I don't know. I never asked."

"I was thinking of a scene from *The Last Chronicle of Barset*," said Wexford, who was rereading his Trollope. "The Archdeacon wants to know how to deal with a recalcitrant son. His daughter, who is a rich marchioness, asks him if he allows her brother an income and when he replies yes, she says, 'I should tell him that must depend upon his conduct.' "

"Does it work?" said Burden, interested in spite of himself.

"No," said Wexford rather sadly. "No, it doesn't. I shouldn't expect it to, not with anyone of spirit, would you?"

An inquiry about an attack on a cyclist took Wexford and Sergeant Martin to Myland Castle. It was the fourth in a series of such assaults, each apparently motiveless, for the amount of money the cyclists carried was negligible. Three were men, one a woman. Two of the attacks happened by day, two after dark. The only pattern discernible seemed to be that the attacks increased in severity. The first, on the woman, consisted in not much more than pushing her off her bicycle and damaging the machine to make it temporarily unusable, but the fourth had put the victim into intensive care with broken bones and a ruptured spleen.

All these seemingly pointless acts of violence had taken place in the Myfleet-Myland neighborhood, this last on the cycle path which led from the Myfleet Road to Myland village and passed on the outer side of the castle moat.

Wexford had already questioned the staff at the castle. The purpose of this return visit was to reexamine one of the guides. Two members of staff, those manning the south gate and the turnstile, claimed to have seen the victim, a frequent cyclist on the path, but only the guide admitted to the possibility of having seen the perpetrator. Just before the castle closed to the public at four, he had been standing in the gathering dusk on the curtain wall between the two south towers.

It was a fine day, a sunny island of a day in a week of fog and rain, and the number of visitors to Myland Castle was nearer a midsummer than a December average. While Martin talked to the woman at the turnstile, Wexford went across the great hall in search

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of the guide. The two o'clock tour had five more minutes to run. Wexford could see the group of about ten people standing on the battlements, the guide pointing across the meadows toward Myland church where the tombs of the castle builders were.

While he waited, Wexford made his way to the remains of a chapel and hall embedded in the inner court. This had been a town rather than a dwelling house, with gatehouses and barracks, almshouses and courts. From the passage along which he was walking, a flight of stone stairs led up onto the curtain wall and these he took, emerging into the fresh air but also to deep shadow. It was possible to walk round the battlements on this walkway, occasionally passing up and down steps inside the turrets. The wall on the inner side was high enough—it came up to his waist—but rather lower on the outer and crenelated. However, the path was wide, the wall was more than small-child height, and even a venturesome older person would have had to lean over and lose balance in order to fall.

Falling would be an atrocious thing, Wexford thought. The battlements here were like cliffs, but with no merciful sea at their base. Their height was increased by the moat, a fifteen-feet-deep ditch whose northern side at this point continued downward the sheer slope of the castle wall. He walked along slowly, keeping in sight the guide, Peter Ratcliffe, and his group, now standing under the great bulwark of the gatehouse flanking tower.

He wasn't alone on the walkway. He could hear a party with children mounting the staircase behind him and in front, some twenty or thirty feet ahead, saw two women appear from the steps inside the first of the south turrets. It was probably his fancy that when she saw him—and saw also those behind him—the younger of the women whispered something to her companion and they turned back the way they had come. Most likely they had meant to turn back anyway and retrace their steps along the sunny side. An area of deep cold shade lay between them and Wexford.

He walked along and through it more quickly. Beyond the turret, the sun began, and it was warm and benign on his face. The two women were still ahead of him and as he observed them talking together, sometimes pointing across the fields or studying the guidebook the older one carried, he knew who they were. That was putting it rather too strongly, perhaps. He guessed who they might be, he *thought* he knew. The bright fair hair of one of them told him and her rather protuberant eyes, extraordinarily blue and clear just as

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Burden had described them. As if she sensed his watchfulness, she turned round and those eyes cast their blue beam on him.

The other woman was small and slight, very upright, perhaps sixty-five, with short grey hair. Hilary Stacey and Ann Waterton. He was so sure that he wouldn't have hesitated to address them by their names.

Inside the gatehouse tower, the main exit staircase went down. He saw them enter the arch to the tower and by the time he had reached it they had begun the descent. Ratcliffe's party immediately appeared, heading in their turn for the exit staircase. Wexford pressed himself against the wall to allow their passage, and when the last of them was through Ratcliffe came sauntering up, all smiles and helpfulness.

"Brainpicking time?" he said. "They tell me I'm needed to help you with your inquiries."

It was uttered in a facetious way, quotation marks very evident round the last words.

Wexford said quietly, "Perhaps we can go a few yards along the walkway, Mr. Ratcliffe, to the place from which you saw the attacker."

A neighbor called the police. It was nine o'clock on a Friday. He went out into his front garden and heard a car engine running. The only car nearby was shut up in Ann Waterton's garage. He opened the garage doors and the first thing he saw was the length of hose attached to the exhaust, passing in through the driver's window.

He switched off the engine and pulled Ann Waterton out. Giving the kiss of life, what he, an elderly man, called artificial respiration, had no effect. She was dead. When the police came, they found the house unlocked but empty. On the table in the dining room, in a sealed envelope marked *To the Coroner*, was what they concluded was a suicide note.

"Where was the girl?" Wexford asked when Martin told him about it the next day.

"Gone on a school trip to London," said Burden. "A theater visit, apparently. Shakespeare—something they were studying. They went in a coach, which didn't get back to Kingsmarkham until eleven-thirty."

"And Sophie, finding what had happened, at last went home to her mother?"

"It would seem so . . ."

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At the inquest, a verdict was returned on Ann Waterton of suicide while the balance of her mind was disturbed. The suicide note, written in the firm, round, characterless hand of the primary-school teacher, was read aloud. *I cannot go on. Life has become a meaningless farce. I am totally alone now with no prospect of things ever changing. I am unwanted, an unnecessary woman, a useless drag on society. It is better for everyone this way, and much better for myself.*
Ann Waterton.

"Totally alone?" Burden said to Jenny. "She had Sophie, didn't she?"

"Sophie was going home."

"What, you mean Sophie meant to leave her? To go home? She'd given in at last?"

"Hilary said so in evidence at the inquest. The coroner asked her about her daughter living with Ann and she told him how Sophie was returning home. She told me privately, between ourselves, that she and Sophie had been talking it over. They had a talk with Ann there and some talks on their own and the upshot was that Sophie said, all right, she'd come home by Christmas and she made a few conditions, but the crux of it was she'd come home."

"Conditions?" Burden took his little boy on his knee. He was wondering, not for the first time, how he would feel in ten years' time if this child, this apple of his eye, upped and packed his bags and went to live in someone else's house. "What conditions?"

"Oh, they were to turn the attics into a sort of flat for her. It's quite a big house. She was to have her own kitchen and bathroom, live separately. Hilary must have agreed. She'd have agreed to almost anything to get Sophie back."

"And Ann Waterton knew this?" Mark was thrusting a book under his father's nose, demanding to be read to. "Yes, just a minute, I will, I promise I will." He said to his wife, "She knew it and that's what she meant by being 'totally alone,' and being 'an unnecessary woman'?"

"I suppose so. It's rather awful, but it's nobody's fault. You have to think of it that if the girl hadn't gone there in the first place Ann Waterton would be dead, anyway. She'd just have died six months sooner. She was determined to kill herself."

Burden nodded. Mark had opened the book and was pointing rather sternly at the first word of the first line. His father began reading the latest adventure of Postman Pat . . .

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"Anthony Trollope," said Wexford, "wrote about fifty books. It's a lot, isn't it? One of them, a not very well known one, is called *Cousin Henry*. I've just finished reading it." He took note of the expression on Burden's face. "I know this bores you. I wouldn't be telling you about it if I didn't think it was important."

"Important?"

"Well, perhaps not important. Interesting. Significant. It gave me something to think about. Trollope wasn't what one would normally think of as a psychologist."

"Too long ago for that, wasn't it?" Burden said vaguely. "I mean, surely psychology wasn't invented till this century."

"I wouldn't say that. Psychology is one of those things that was always with us—before anyone gave it a name, that is. Like, well, linguistics, for instance. And 'invented' isn't quite the word. Discovered."

It was the end of the day. They were at a table in the saloon bar of the Olive and Dove. Earlier, Wexford had made an arrest, that of Peter Ratcliffe, the Myland Castle guide. His attacks on the cyclists he was unable adequately to account for, though he had fully confessed to all of them. The explanation he gave Wexford was a strange one—it almost pointed to a disturbance of the man's mind. His daily presence in the castle, year after year, day after day, had brought him to a curious identification with its former defenders. It impelled him to attack those he saw as intruders. Perhaps it would only have been a matter of time before the paying visitors appeared to him in the same light and he injured one of them.

Wexford didn't know whether he believed this or not. No court would. Burden had stared in incredulous disgust when Wexford repeated Ratcliffe's words. That was why—partly why—he had changed the subject onto *Cousin Henry*.

"Bear with me," he said, "while I give you a brief outline of the plot." Burden didn't exactly demur, not quite. His face was a sigh incarnate.

Wexford said, "I promise you it's relevant." He added, "It even gets exciting."

Burden nodded. He looked reflectively into his beer.

"The old squire dies," Wexford began, "and leaves all his property to his nephew Henry. Or that's how it appears, that's what everyone thinks, and Henry comes into his inheritance. Then he finds a later will which leaves everything to his cousin Isabel. Henry's best bet is to destroy this will, but he doesn't. He daren't. He hides it in a

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place where he thinks it will never be found—in a book in the library, a book that is so boring no one would ever want to take it down and open it.

"Why doesn't he destroy it? He's afraid. It's an official document, an almost sacred thing—it exercises an awesome power over him, it's almost as if he's afraid of some unnamed retribution. Yet if he destroys it—a simple thing to do, though Henry, in his mind, discovers terrible difficulties in the way of doing this—if he does, all will be secure forever and he the undisputed man in possession. But he can't destroy it, he dare not. Good psychology, don't you think? People behave like that, inexplicably, absurdly, but that's how they behave."

"I suppose so. Thousands would. Have destroyed it, I mean. Most would."

"Not the law-abiding. Not the conventional. Someone like you wouldn't."

"I wouldn't have nicked it in the first place," said Burden. "What's the point of all this? You said there was a point."

"Oh, yes. The Stacey-Grant-Waterton affair, that's the point."

Burden looked up at him, surprised. "No wills involved in that, so far as I know."

"No wills," said Wexford, "but another sort of document—a sacred sort of document. A suicide note."

Wexford was silent for a moment, enjoying the look on Burden's face, a mixture of incredulity and sheer alarm. "Let me give you a scenario," he said. "Let me give you an alternative to what actually happened—a lonely, unhappy woman at last succeeding at taking her own life."

"Why have an alternative to the facts?"

"Just listen to a theory, then. Ann Waterton didn't commit suicide. She had no reason to commit suicide. She was happy, she was happier than she'd been since her husband died. She had found an affectionate, charming granddaughter who wanted more than anything in the world to live with her."

"Wait a minute," said Burden. "Sophie may have been living with her, but she wasn't going to go on doing that. She was going home. She was going back to her mother and her stepfather."

"Was she? Do we have anyone's word for that but Hilary Stacey's?"

"She told the coroner under oath."

"Hmm," said Wexford. "D'you want another drink?"

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"I don't think I do. I want to hear the rest of what you've got to say."

"All right. The fact is that we have no evidence that Sophie intended to go home but Hilary Stacey's word."

"Sophie herself. Sophie could presumably confirm it?"

Wexford smiled rather enigmatically. "Hilary Stacey's her mother. She may have been at odds with her but I don't think she'd shop her own mother."

"Shop her?"

"Hilary Stacey murdered Ann Waterton, Mike."

"You mean that's your theory, that's your alternative."

"I saw them at Myland Castle about ten days ago. I recognized them from your description. If I hadn't been there, if so many visitors hadn't been there, an exceptional number for December but it was an exceptionally nice day, I think Hilary—oh, yes, it's hindsight—was going to push Ann off that wall. It would have been, would have looked, like an accident. It was made impossible by the circumstances.

"Three days afterward, Sophie went on a school trip to a London theater. Hilary was often at the house in Coulson Gardens—it would have been nothing out of the way for her to drop in during the evening. The next step was to give Ann a sleeping pill. She would have made them both a drink and given her the pill in that. Ann was a small, slight woman—it looked to me as if she weighed about seven stone. Hilary Stacey, on the other hand, is tall and strong and no more than—what? Thirty-seven? Thirty-eight? She carried Ann out to the garage, by way of the communicating door from the house, sat her in the driver's seat, and fixed up that business with the hose pipe and the exhaust.

"No doubt she supposed Sophie would find the body. An unpleasant thought. Would a mother do that to her child? Perhaps not. Perhaps Hilary intended to come back later and find the body herself. In the event, the next-door neighbor found Ann Waterton."

Burden said, "It doesn't work, Reg. You're forgetting the suicide note. Ann left a note for the coroner."

"I'm not forgetting it. The suicide note is at the heart of all this. We have to go back to last May or June, whenever it was. Ann Waterton attempted to kill herself, but the attempt was frustrated by Sophie Grant and her mother. There was no suicide note—or was there? Has anyone heard of the existence of a suicide note? On the other hand, has the existence of such a note been denied? Let us

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postulate that there was such a note. On the mantelpiece or in a pocket of Ann's dress or by her bed. Remember that suicides, especially 'home' suicides, almost always leave a note."

"Yes, but we've discussed this. That first time, Hilary and Sophie wanted to keep it dark that there had been a suicide attempt. For Mrs. Waterton's sake."

"What are you saying, Inspector Burden? And you a policeman! Are you saying they *destroyed a suicide note* for no more reason than to protect the reputation of a woman who was then a mere acquaintance? No, of course you aren't and of course they didn't. Isn't it quite reprehensible enough to remove and conceal such a note? It's quite possible indeed that Sophie knew nothing about it but that Hilary, spotting what it was, picked it up and took it away with her."

"But didn't destroy it?"

"No, no. Remember Cousin Henry. She took it. She had no prevision of any future need for it. Ann at that time had done her no harm and there was no hint that she would. She took it, as I say, and read it, as Cousin Henry read his uncle's will, and decided to tell no one about it. Ann had been found in time, Ann would survive. And, by the way, I'd suggest at that time the note was in its envelope but *unsealed*. Hilary later did the sealing.

"She preserved it. Not for any nefarious purpose then, but simply because it had become an official document, a document of great weight and significance, fraught almost with magic. Perhaps she thought she'd give it back to Ann one day. Ann would be happy again and they would—dare she expect it?—laugh about it together. But I think the real reason for preserving it was Cousin Henry's. She was *afraid* to destroy it. And why do so, anyway? Easier than destroying it was to slip it inside a book in the way Cousin Henry concealed the will, a book no one in the household was ever likely to want to read or even take down and look at.

"In Cousin Henry's case, it was Jeremy Taylor's sermons. What book Hilary Stacey used we'll never know and it doesn't matter. Perhaps, anyway, she kept it in a drawer with her underclothes.

"But possession of the suicide note gave her the idea for Ann Waterton's murder. After she had put Ann into the car, she had only to place the note on the table and, making sure she had left no fingerprints, return home and leave the body to be discovered."

Burden, who had listened to the last part of this in silence and with his head bowed, now looked up. He shook his head a little, but

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rather as if in wonder at human depravity than from any particular doubt at what Wexford had told him. It might be true. Hilary Stacey had been angry enough, desperate enough. He realized he had never really liked her.

"You'll never prove it," he said, and as he spoke he was confident Wexford would agree with him. Wexford would give him a rueful smile, accept the inevitable.

His chief often, still, surprised him.

"I shall have a damn good try," said Wexford.

Staying out drinking wasn't Burden's way. It never had been. He was an uxorious man, a home-loving man. Anyway, he liked to be with his little boy before Mark went to bed, liked if possible to put him to bed himself. If the licensing hours hadn't changed from a cast-iron regularity to depend upon the whim of the landlord, he wouldn't have been able to have a beer with Wexford at ten to five. As it was, he was still early, though the evening was as dark as midnight. He walked home, thinking about Hilary Stacey. It seemed to him unfortunate she had been Jenny's friend. How much, he wondered, did Jenny care for her? And should he tell Jenny something of all this?

It might be best to wait a while, see what unfolded, see how Wexford progressed. There would be a point at which he would know the time had come to divulge horrors, undreamt-of intrigue.

He found Jenny in an armchair by the fire, the child on her knee. Mark was in pajamas and a blue dressing gown of classic cut, piped in navy and tied with a silk cord. Jenny was reading to him, Beatrix Potter this time, the one about the kitten who traps a mouse in her pocket handkerchief, but the mouse escapes through a hole. Mark was mad about literature, he would soon be able to read himself. Rather gloomily, Burden saw a future with a son always talking about books.

Mark got down from Jenny's lap and came over to his father. Another adventure of some thwarted predator or enterprising rodent was demanded. While Burden was looking through the collection on the bookshelf, the doorbell rang.

After dark, he answered the door himself to unexpected visitors. You never could tell. He went out into the hall, Jenny behind him with the boy, holding his hand because he was nearly too heavy to carry.

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Burden opened the door and the girl came in. She stepped in quickly and stood for a moment in the hall, a suitcase in each hand.

"I've come," Sophie said, smiling. "I'll cook for you, I'll look after Mark, I won't be any trouble. Don't bother to come with me, Mike, I'll just take these straight up to the spare room."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

SWEET CHOICE

by DOROTHY EARLANDSON

The lady was wont to eat candy in bed
While mystery stories she avidly read.
Her husband, alarmed at her increasing girth,
Said, "Listen, my darling, for what it is worth,
You're now twice the girl that I married in May—
I can't stick around if you go on this way.
You must make a choice now. So which will it be—
Your candy and crime tales or will it be me?"

The lady in question looked up from her book
As from 'neath her pillow a pistol she took.
"I never did think," said she, aiming the gun,
"You'd be such a spoilsport when I'm having fun.
But since I must choose, and you say you won't stay,
I'll help you along on your dark, lonely way."
She then pulled the trigger and watched with a sigh
Her poor husband fall to the floor and soon die.

Then calmly she reached for a pecan praline
And turned a new page in her *Ellery Queen.*

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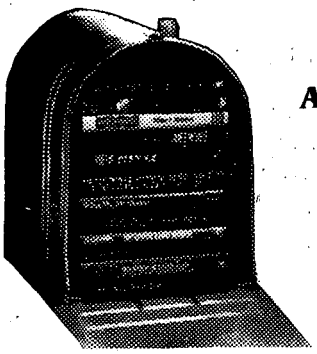

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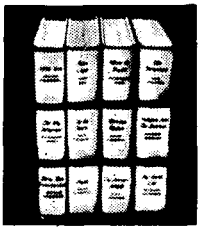

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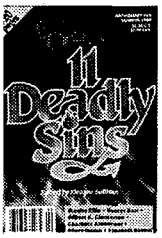

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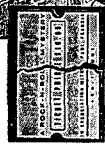

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